THE SLOANE SQUARE MYSTERY

HERBERT ADAMS

10/35

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THE SLOANE SQUARE MYSTERY

To

C. F. BOWDEN

Who is at least partly to blame for my having written this book

THE SLOANE SQUARE MYSTERY

BY

HERBERT ADAMS

AUTHOR OF "BY ORDER OF THE FIVE,"
"THE SECRET OF BOGEY HOUSE," ETC.

METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published in 1925

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

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THE SLOANE SQUARE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE DISCOVERY

IT was nearly half-past one on a Sunday morning. Sloane Square, busy all day with the traffic that streamed across it from six different directions, was silent and deserted. The moon was casting long dark shadows from the irregular buildings that surrounded it, shadows that were in places softened by the rays of the electric lamps. The last of the omnibuses had passed on its homeward way to Clapham or Highbury or some other remote part of the town, and for the moment neither taxi-cab nor motor-car was visible.

Then in the far corner of the wide empty space, approaching from the direction of Eaton Square, two men came slowly along. They wore the uniform of well-to-do respectability. Their white shirts and white waistcoats, only partly concealed by their unbuttoned overcoats, suggested that they had left some festive gathering in that fashionable part of Belgravia and were taking advantage of the warm pleasant evening to stroll to their homes, probably not far away.

"Do you know what I alwaysh feel when I walk through Sloane Square, Spider?" asked the shorter of them, slurring his words just a little.

"Thankful you *can* walk, I expect."

"I alwaysh feel great reshpect for that man Willett who put up that big building there—the daylight shaving man. I feel reshpect for all good builders. When I get to heaven I'd like to be able to look down and shay, 'that's my monument, those fine buildings I put up.'"

"If you don't behave better than you are doing, Neddie, I am afraid you will only be able to point to the foundations."

"But don't you think, Spider," went on the other unheeding, "don't you think there is something mysterious about Sloane Square in the moonlight?" He spoke slowly and his voice was not uncultured, although one word, 'myshterioush' as he pronounced it, troubled him a little. "It's a wide open space, silent and lonely. It isn't square, and there are no railings, no lawns and no flower beds. Just a dozen trees here, and four trees there, cashting their deep shadows over the cement paving and lamenting the commercial abasement of an age that—that——"

"Neddie, my lad," said his friend, as he groped for a word to finish his sentence, "when you are really drunk you are funny. When you are really sober you are tolerable; but when you are neither drunk nor sober you just blither. There is more arc light than moonlight just at present, and for your future guidance let me tell you there are nine trees in all, six here and three over there."

"I'm quite sober, Spider, but the moonlight is myshterioush. I'll prove I'm sober. There are six trees here as you say. I was speaking with poetic lichense, but over there there are four. I can count four distinctly. I bet you a fiver there are four trees."

"No bets, Ned, with laddies who are over the line. But it's a tribute to Lady Grantley's hospitality. I cannot think how you managed it."

"There *are* four trees, Spider. We will go and count them."

"No, no, laddie. I am going up Sloane Street and so are you."

"But I inshist on counting those trees first. My honour is involved as a man of temperate habits and as a mathematician."

The last word bothered him a little, but he seized his friend's arm and dragged him to the odd-shaped island on the further side of the square on which the tall stone cross, erected to the undying memory of the heroes of Chelsea who fell in the Great War, is surrounded by three well grown trees.

"You are right, Spider. There are only three, though from a distance—but—good Heavens!—what is that?"

They both stepped quickly forward, for lying in the shadows, between the tall memorial and a low granite fountain some few feet from it, lay the prostrate figure of a man.

"He's dead, Spider!" said the one called Ned. His companion had stooped and had partially raised the fallen form, turning its face towards the light. They saw a man, clean-shaven, with grey hair, appar-

ently about sixty years of age. His face had the pallor of death, except for a gash on the cheek, caused, it would seem, by contact with the sharp edge of the base of the fountain against which he was lying. There was no sign of any other injury, but the trickle of blood was vividly clear on the white skin. He was in evening dress and his hat lay a few feet away.

"I know him, Ned! It is Sir Nicholas Brannock!"

"Rollo's uncle?"

"Yes."

There was a moment's pause as they wondered what they ought to do. Ned, completely sobered by the shock, spoke first.

"He lives in Cadogan Square, doesn't he? Quite near."

"Yes—he must have been walking out and fallen in a fit—or had a heart attack. You must stop here while I fetch a doctor. Oh, there's a policeman."

They shouted to the constable, who hurried across to them. They told him what had happened. The constable, a young and stalwart member of the force, bent over the body and then produced his note-book.

"He's dead," he said.

"Spider thinks it is heart failure. He cut his face when he fell."

"I should like your names and addresses."

"It is Sir Nicholas Brannock," said the one called Spider. "He lives in Cadogan Square. Shall we not take him to his home—or fetch a doctor?"

"He must go to the mortuary," said the constable. "They'll send word to the house from there, if he is the man you think. What is your name, Sir?"

"My name is Bruce Graham——"

"He called you something else." The policeman sounded a little suspicious.

"He called me Spider; there is a tale, you know, about Bruce and the spider. He is the Honourable Edward Lamport. Now let me run and fetch a doctor in case there is any hope."

"No hope, I fear. Where will you go?"

"There is a doctor a little way along in Sloane Street."

"All right, Sir. If the doctor is in would you 'phone to the station? Just ask for the police and they'll put you through—and tell them to send an ambulance. I'll wait here with your friend."

Bruce Graham dashed off, and luckily Dr. Hawton, who had but recently come to Sloane Street, answered the night bell himself. He was in his dressing-gown, and when he heard why he was wanted, asked only for a few moments to put on some suitable clothes. While he was doing this he allowed Graham to use his telephone to give the message to the police station. Then the two together hastened back to the square.

In the meanwhile the constable had been jotting down a few more details of the happening. He examined the plinth of the fountain and the base of the cross, and he walked all round the little island; but beyond some stray pieces of paper and a torn

placard left by some untidy newsboy, he found nothing there at all. Directly the doctor arrived, a quick but careful examination of the body was made. It was too late to administer restoratives. There was no doubt that life was extinct.

"What do you think was the cause of death?" asked Lamport.

"That it is impossible to say without proper examination," replied the doctor.

"No sign of foul play?" inquired the policeman.

"I see none," was the answer. "The contusion on the cheek is superficial and would be occasioned by the fall. Is he just as you found him?"

"He was lying on his side, almost on his face," said Graham. "I lifted him a little, and then I recognised him."

The doctor stooped again and raised the dead man's eyelids, and looked closely at his lips, but made no further comment. The constable had picked up the fallen hat, and once again scrutinised the pavement around the cross and the fountain. He ran the light of his lantern along the surrounding gutters, but still found nothing that seemed to have any connection with the tragedy.

Then the motor ambulance drew up near them. They bared their heads as with reverent hands they lifted the body and laid it on the stretcher which slid easily into the car.

"You say he is Sir Nicholas Brannock," said Dr. Hawton to Graham. "I do not know him, but of course everyone has heard of him. His work for the children's hospital and his charitable appeals are known everywhere."

"That is so," said Graham. "I have often met him, and I know members of his family quite well. It will be a terrible shock to Lady Brannock.

"If you and your friend are going to the police station I will come with you."

The constable had mounted the car so that he could make his report to his headquarters, and the three other men followed on foot. It was only a short walk to the police station, and, as they went along, both Lamport and Graham sought to get a little more information from the medical man. What did he really think was the cause of death? Was it a fit? Was it heart failure? Would a fall be fatal if he had struck his head on the granite plinth? How long had he been lying there before they found him?

The doctor, however, was naturally a reserved and cautious man. He shook his head and said again it would be improper to express any definite opinion until a thorough examination had been made, a proceeding obviously impossible in the dim light in the open air. Whether he meant to do so or not, he gave the impression that there were details he found rather perplexing.

At the police station the Inspector in charge got Bruce Graham and the Hon. Edward Lamport once again to relate the exact circumstances in which they found the body, and why they had been passing there at the time—though they did not think it necessary to inform him of their difference of opinion as to the number of the trees. A gold watch and chain, a cigarette case and a wallet with money in it were

found on the body, but no cards or anything bearing the owner's name.

"Are you quite sure it is Sir Nicholas Brannock?" asked the Inspector.

"Quite," said Bruce. "I know him well."

"And he lives in Cadogan Square?"

"At number 101."

The Inspector turned up a directory and verified the address.

"I had better send there for someone to confirm the identification, and to break the news to his family. The butler, perhaps, if they keep a butler."

"They do," said Graham.

The Inspector then asked Dr. Hawton to tell him what he had noticed. The doctor, however, suggested he should see the police surgeon first, and discuss the matter with him, and perhaps make a further examination.

"I think he is here now," said the Inspector. "Will you go through to him?" He thanked the others for their assistance and said there would of course be an inquest. If their attendance was required he would let them know.

"Had Sir Nicholas any children?" he asked, as they were going.

"He lost his only son in the war," said Bruce. "The title passes, I believe, to his nephew."

"So Rollo gets the title," remarked Ned Lamport, as they resumed their delayed journey homeward. "Does he get the estates, too?"

"The greater part of them, I believe. Something like fifteen thousand a year."

"By Jove, Spider! What a slice of luck for him!

The old gentleman might have lived for another twenty years. It's an ill wind that doesn't blow apples into someone's garden—and Rollo can do with a few, can't he ? "

" Yes, he has had a bad time lately, but he deserves his luck. Good old Rollo ! "

CHAPTER II

A MODERN MIRACLE

IT was the evening of the same Sabbath day. In the drawing-room of a small house in Hans Place, which is but a few minutes' walk from Sloane Square, a miracle was happening. A miracle that our fathers would have declared beyond the dreams of reason, but which we accept as one of the commonplaces of life.

In the drawing-room were seated three people, Richard Wedderburn, an elderly man whose intellectual face would have made him noticeable anywhere; Joan, his daughter, a girl of about two and twenty; and Angela Marsden, generally called Auntie Angela.

They were sitting in absolute silence, not one of them uttering a single word, and yet in clear ringing tones a voice was heard all over the room. It was a voice from far away, a voice speaking to a crowded congregation in a church many miles distant, and yet, by the miracle of wireless, being heard as clearly, possibly more clearly, in that and thousands of other homes.

The old man, who was slightly deaf, sat close to the loud speaker, as the trumpet that transmits the sounds

is called. His eyes were closed and his head nodded occasionally, but it was not the nod of slumber, it was the nod of approval and acquiescence as he listened eagerly to the words of the invisible preacher. A deeply religious man was Richard Wedderburn, and it delighted him to hear the Gospel message given so plainly and so simply.

Auntie Angela sat with her hands clasped in front of her, as she would have sat in church. Her eyes were drooped, and she, too, listened, or seemed to listen, to the sermon from afar. Poor, well-meaning, misunderstood Auntie Angela! How different her life might have been if her nose had had some other shape! The best kind of noses are those you do not see; noses that fit in with the rest of a charming face and so escape individual notice.

A nose that is too large, too long, too sharp; that is twisted or bent, or too vividly coloured, is seen at once, and immediately forces on the beholder an estimate of its owner's character—an estimate that may be entirely wrong. Auntie Angela's nose was her misfortune. On the strong face of a politician or a lawyer such a nose would have inspired respect and probably fear. It would suggest a determination to get at the bottom of things that it would be useless to resist. But above Auntie Angela's weak mouth and receding chin that protruding nose caused resentment. It suggested interference, and however well-meaning Auntie Angela might be, no one would trust her with their confidences. Her nose kept them at bay, even as in her younger days it had kept at bay

the suitors who had married her less amiable sisters. Now she had come to the home of her brother-in-law and tried timidly to be of help to her motherless niece.

And Joan—was she listening, or of what was she thinking? She lay on a low deep chair, her hands behind her head and her eyes fixed on the ceiling. Her legs were carelessly crossed and displayed almost to the knee her shapely silk stockings. Her attitude in its graceful abandon would have delighted an artist. Her bobbed hair set off the oval of her face, and her complexion was perfect. She had a firm little chin, a nose to which no exception could be taken, and wide grey eyes that seemed to vary in their tint with her passing moods.

" . . . and perhaps you will say," went on the clear voice of the invisible preacher, " perhaps you will say ' I cannot accept your creeds.' Very likely you can't; it does not matter. Perhaps you will say ' I cannot believe that Christ is the Son of God.' Very well, that may come later. You agree that Christ was a pattern for men and you would wish to be like Him. Then start on that. For just one week determine that you will live as He would have lived, as He would have you live. Do that honestly for one week and by God's Grace other things may follow . . ." and so on to the end of his earnest appeal.

Then the benediction, and the closing hymn filling the room with its familiar melodies. Then silence.

" Hullo, Wedderburn—wireless worship again? That's the last nail in the coffin of church-going,

isn't it ? How are you, Miss Marsden ? How do, Joan ? "

It was their breezy friend and neighbour, General Raeton, coming in, as was his habit, to see his old crony.

" Churches won't suffer if people listen to addresses like that," replied Mr. Wedderburn. " You should have come in earlier. Wireless makes many things easy to understand. Prayer, for instance. We might have wondered how the voices or thoughts of thousands could possibly reach the Almighty. Yet now the voice of one wafted through space reaches the thousands. The inversion of the miracle seems simple."

" I dare say you are right. My wife sees to that for both of us."

" Has Mrs. Raeton gone to church to-night ? " asked Auntie Angela.

" Not exactly," said the General, with a chuckle. " She has gone to hear Gabriel Jowlett deliver a message. He has a religion of his own."

" What is it ? "

" I don't know. It is altogether beyond me. My dear wife is terribly suspicious where I am concerned, but she will swallow anything and everything people like that tell her. Jowlett holds that that which appears to be is not. Matter is immaterial ; mind is force, truth is limitless. Christian Science, Theosophy, Spiritualism are all true, but are parts only of the Big Truth. And for further information as to the Big Truth apply to Gabriel Jowlett."

" This thirst for new creeds is pathetic," said Mr. Wedderburn. " It shows the need of religion

and yet people will not accept the simple Gospel. They want to put it in some fresh and fantastic form."

While the older people were talking in this way, Joan had disconnected the loud speaker and had donned the ear-phones so that she might enjoy the harmonies of a famous orchestra. She loved good music and did not care for theological discussions. Presently she took off the 'phone and switched the loud speaker on again.

"Listen, Daddy," she cried. "The news bulletin, and a special announcement."

Then a new voice sounded through the room, clear, cultured and carefully articulated.

"I have one special announcement to make. In the early hours of this morning Sir Nicholas Brannock, the well-known philanthropist, was found dead in Sloane Square. Will anyone who spoke to or saw him after the hour of seven last evening please communicate at once with Scotland Yard, or with the nearest police station. I will repeat that. . . ."

"What does it mean, Daddie? We heard at church this morning that Sir Nicholas had died, but they said it was heart failure."

"I do not know, my dear. If it was heart failure it may have been brought on by a shock, and they may want to know what occasioned that shock."

"But he called here a little after seven—to bring your book back. Must we tell the police that?"

"I certainly think you should," said General Raeton. "Did he come in?"

" No. I met him at the door. He handed me the book and asked me to give it to Daddie. He seemed all right then."

" Here is Bruce," said Mr. Wedderburn. " Perhaps he can tell us something."

Bruce Graham came in. He kissed his Auntie Angela and his cousin Joan and shook hands with the men.

At one time Joan had told him that she did not know that cousins of their age ought to kiss. " If I may not kiss you I will certainly not kiss Auntie Ange," was his reply, and as that would have been unkind he was allowed to continue the cheerful practice. On this occasion there was more excuse for it as he had been away yachting for two months and had only just returned.

" Well, Bruce, did you have a good time ? "

" A ripping time, weather perfect except for just one real storm to break the monotony. I got back on Friday and should have come round yesterday, but Ned Lamport persuaded me to go to Lady Grantley's. I rather expected to meet you all there."

" You found Sir Nicholas Brannock, didn't you ? " asked Joan.

" Ned and I did. Poor old chap."

" They have just sent out a wireless S.O.S.," said General Raeton, " asking anyone who spoke to him or saw him last night to communicate with the police."

" By Jove, that's a good idea."

" Why a good idea ? " asked his uncle.

" Everyone will hear of it. I expect by morning the police will have received a complete account of all

his movements. Wonderful, isn't it? Thousands and thousands of people get that message and so by morning a complete jigsaw of the day's doings will be fitted together."

"Yes," said the General, "but why do they want it?"

"Well, they are not quite satisfied," said the young man, hesitating a little. "I went round to the police station again this afternoon, and although the Inspector was very guarded, he hinted that the doctors were doubtful about it being a case of heart failure. He might have been poisoned."

"Poisoned!"

"Yes. It's only a suggestion, a suspicion; please don't think it is anything more. An examination of the organs has to be made."

"Do you mean ptomaine poisoning?" inquired Joan.

"I asked the Inspector that. He shrugged his shoulders and said ptomaine poisoning was generally a slow and painful business. Not a sudden seizure as this would seem to have been."

"But surely they cannot suspect foul play?" asked the uncle.

"I hope not," said Bruce. "At present it is rather a mystery, but when they make the autopsy and get more information no doubt it will be cleared up all right."

"How terrible for poor Lady Brannock. I wonder how she is," said Auntie Angela.

"I called to inquire," replied her nephew. "I was told she was prostrated by the shock, and the doctor has been with her nearly all day."

Whatever the cause may have been, the sudden death of a man they had known quite well, and who appeared to have many years of life in front of him, was a shock to them all. They discussed the matter for a long time, and then Joan beckoned Bruce to follow her out of the room. They went to her own little boudoir or den.

"Have you seen Rollo yet?" she asked.

"No. I rang him up this morning, but they said he was away."

"Well, I'd better tell you. It's all over. We broke it off a month ago."

"You broke it off?"

The girl nodded.

"I noticed you were not wearing the ring. But why was it?"

"One thing and another. We quarrelled. I threw him over. It was hard, damned hard, but it was right. So now I am going to be a lonely spinster like Auntie Ange and devote myself to my motor-bike and my Sunday School class."

"But is it quite hopeless? He will be Sir Rollo now."

"Don't be a beast, Bruce. You don't suppose that will affect matters?"

"No—but Rollo is a good chap, Joan."

"Perhaps we have different standards," said the girl, her eyes seeming to grow darker as she said it.

"Won't you tell me what it was all about?"

"You can ask him when you go to congratulate him."

"Well, I'm sorry," said her cousin. "You two

were my best pals, and almost my first thought when I knew Sir Nicholas was dead was that it would make things easier for you."

"And as it happens it makes them more than ever impossible." Again her cousin pressed her to explain her reasons, but she shook her head and merely answered:

"Ask Rollo."

CHAPTER III

THE SUPPER

MENTION was made in all the papers the next morning of the sudden death of Sir Nicholas Brannock. It was generally assumed that a severe heart attack was responsible for the tragedy, although the possibility of a fall proving fatal if his head had struck the base of the fountain was not overlooked. It was stated that an inquest would be held the following day.

Most of the journals made eulogistic references to the philanthropic work of the deceased gentleman and said the world was the poorer for his passing. One paper in reminding its readers that he had lost his only son, a youth of barely twenty, in the early days of the war, commented on the tragic coincidence that the father had been found dead at the foot of the cross put up in memory of that son and other Chelsea men. Sir Nicholas had subscribed liberally to the memorial and, devoted to his boy as he was, perhaps had he been asked he would have chosen no other spot for falling to rest.

Bruce Graham read these journalistic tributes very carefully as he sat at breakfast. He was relieved to see there was no suggestion that Sir Nicholas had

lost his life from any sinister cause. Death, when nature suddenly snaps the cord of life, is terrible enough, but he had been more disturbed by the words of the police inspector than he had let his relatives know. Possibly the authorities were now satisfied, and so the newspapers had no suspicion of what it had at one moment been feared lay behind the tragedy. Most of the papers, however, repeated the request, already circulated by wireless, that anyone who had seen or spoken to the deceased Baronet during the evening hours preceding his death should communicate with the authorities.

Bruce occupied a small service flat off Sloane Street. He was a bachelor on the sunny side of thirty and had lost both his parents in his boyhood. His mother had been the younger sister of old Mr. Wedderburn of Hans Place, and he had always been like a big brother to his cousin Joan. Angela Marsden was not, strictly speaking, his aunt, but he understood her better than many folk did and had never objected to the assumed relationship.

He had read for the bar, but being in comfortable circumstances had never practised. He said he was studying politics and meant to stand for Parliament as soon as he could decide which of the political parties he really believed in. Unfortunately he declared that the more he considered the matter the greater became his doubts, so that he had a good deal of time on his hands to devote to cricket, golf, and other open-air sports. He also devoted himself to the task of educating his friend and neighbour, the Hon. Edward Lamport, the son of the enterprising man whose insistence on the merits of Lamport's Lard had even-

tually landed him in the House of Lords—where he was perfectly happy with his title of Garrowsweet, and found his only annoyance when enemies would address him as My Lard.

Bruce was just lighting his after breakfast pipe when his telephone bell rang.

"Hullo, Spider! Is that you? Rollo speaking."

"Yes, I'm here. How are you, Rollo?"

"They told me you rang up yesterday. I did not know you were back. I want to see you badly. Can you run round, or will you stay in if I come along?"

"I meant to give you a call, anyway, so I'll come right along now. Cheerio."

Rollo Brannock—Sir Rollo as he now became—enjoyed the advantage of a good address, for he lived in Ryder Street, St. James's; but the single room that was his suggested he was not so well blessed with this world's goods as were some of his neighbours. The room was at the top of the building, and, although it was light and had good floor space, much of that space was of little use to him, as on two of the sides the floor and ceiling almost met. The habitable portion of the apartment was plainly but comfortably furnished. The bed, which was in a position where standing was impossible, became a neat settee in the daytime; and as he shared with two others the use of a bathroom, his abode presented the appearance of a cheery though misshapen living room, with its leather easy chairs, oak table and book shelves. He also was reading the obituary notices of his uncle when his friend arrived.

"Well, Rollo, old chap, I'm sorry about your

uncle; although in a way I suppose you are to be congratulated."

"In a way I suppose I am; but it's a terrible shock. When did you get back?"

"On Saturday. Ned Lamport dragged me round to old Lady Grantley's. Vowed you would be there."

"I was asked. Have you had a good time?"

"Top-hole. Gordon's yacht is a beauty. We cruised along the Mediterranean and put in a few days at Monte and had a week at Cairo, although it was a bit hot."

There was a pause. They were old friends, but were hesitating a little in opening the subject they wanted to talk about. It was Rollo who began.

"About my uncle," he said. "I see in the paper the police want to hear from people who met him on Saturday night. Do you think I ought to tell them he had supper with me?"

"He had supper with you? Good Heavens!" Bruce jumped up in his surprise as he said it. Then he added in his ordinary quiet tone: "Yes, you must tell them at once."

"I was going to. You see, I went for a motor run early yesterday morning and it was after midnight when I got back. I did not hear anything about it until Brooks brought up my breakfast this morning. Then he gave me the papers and told me of Uncle Nick's death, and said that you and others had rung up."

"He didn't tell you that it was Ned Lamport and I who found the poor old boy?"

" No, how was that ? "

Bruce soon described how the body had been discovered, and then added :

" At first the doctors seemed in doubt as to the real cause of death, but I suppose that is all cleared up now. Anyway——"

He was interrupted by a tap at the door, and a short thick-set dark man in a neat grey suit entered. He looked at the friends, and turned at once to Rollo.

" You are Mr. Rollo Brannock, I believe, nephew of Sir Nicholas Brannock ? I am Inspector Porter of Scotland Yard."

" Hullo, Porter ! " said Spider. " You remember me ? I am Bruce Graham. We had a bit of fun together when I helped you round up those Yankee crooks at the Savoy."

" Yes, Sir, I remember you. But I want a few words with Mr.—Sir Rollo."

" We were just coming round to see you."

" It is about my uncle's death, I suppose ? " asked Rollo.

" Yes. We broadcasted a notice last night and we got a good deal of information. We heard among other things that Sir Nicholas called here for you and after a time you went out together and had supper at the Critz Grill in Piccadilly."

" That is so. As Mr. Graham says, we were just coming round to tell you. I was away yesterday and only got the news this morning."

" Well, Sir, it is only fair that I should let you know that the doctors say Sir Nicholas Brannock was poisoned."

"Poisoned!" Rollo's voice showed incredulity and shock.

"Yes, Sir. I believe the precise poison used is not yet known, but I am instructed there is no doubt as to the fact."

There was a painful pause for a few minutes. Bruce was the first to speak.

"Is it possible that Sir Nicholas committed suicide?"

"That is a question that of course has to be investigated," replied the Inspector. "Meanwhile, as the supper at the Critz would appear to be the last meal he had, you will see the necessity of my making inquiries about it."

"Quite right," said Rollo, after another short pause. "What can I tell you?"

The Inspector produced his note-book and refused the drink he was offered.

"Well, Sir, at what hour did Sir Nicholas call for you?"

"I think it was just after ten."

"Were you expecting him?"

"I was not."

"I think you were talking for some time and he had a taxi waiting?"

"That is so. We were here about fifteen minutes before we went to the restaurant."

"Did you suggest getting something to eat, or did he?"

"He did."

"Did you have anything before you went out—a drink, or anything like that?"

"No, nothing."

"Do you happen to remember what you had for supper?"

"Yes. We shared a dozen oysters and had some jugged hare and a little cheese."

"And you drank?"

"We had a bottle of Pommard, and some coffee afterwards."

"That was all?"

"Yes."

"You each had the same?"

"Yes."

"And you felt no ill effects after?"

"None at all."

The Inspector quickly jotted down the replies to his questions. So far no light seemed to be thrown on the mystery, if mystery there was.

"Was Sir Nicholas at all strange in his manner, or did he seem exactly as usual?"

Rollo paused for a considerable time before he replied.

"He seemed rather thirsty," he said at last. "I remember now that he drank most of the wine and had a syphon of soda with it."

"Nothing else occurs to you?"

"No."

"And no one else joined you or spoke to you while you were there?"

"No. As a matter of fact the place was rather empty—late, you know, for dinner, and the theatres were not over."

Again there was a pause. The Inspector tapped his pencil on his teeth and seemed to be thinking.

"You say you did not notice anything strange in

your uncle's manner?" he asked presently. "He seemed just as usual?"

"He seemed—I can hardly say. I did not very often see my uncle."

"Oh, then there was a special reason for your meeting that evening?"

Rollo hesitated.

"There was a reason," he said at last, "but I do not see that it can affect matters."

"We never can tell what will affect matters until we know the whole truth of a case," said the Inspector.

Rollo made no reply. He was a well-set-up, handsome young fellow with merry blue eyes, but just then he was undoubtedly looking anxious and rather worried.

"I think you should tell me why your uncle called for you that night, seeing that it was an exceptional thing for him to do," said Porter quietly, but very seriously.

"There are some things I must exercise my own judgment about," was the hesitating reply.

"Well, Sir, you are not bound to answer me, but it may save trouble if you do. Remember this was not an ordinary occasion. It was the last meal taken by your uncle before he was found dead, and it is stated he died of poisoning."

The Inspector spoke impressively, and Rollo walked towards the window which jutted out from the sloping line of the roof. His friend watched him rather anxiously. He had been somewhat dismayed when he had heard of that supper with the uncle. It is not pleasant to know that the man who took food with you

died just afterwards from poisoning. The detective sat and waited.

" Sir Nicholas came to offer me financial assistance," Rollo said at length, turning towards them again.

" Financial assistance," repeated the Inspector. " You were in some difficulty then, and he knew it ? "

The man at the window nodded.

" You will understand I am not seeking to pry into your private affairs, but I must do my duty, even if it is unpleasant. Had you applied to him for assistance ? "

" I had not."

" Did you accept his offer ? "

" I did not."

" You refused it ? "

A nod was the reply and there was silence for a time. Bruce was getting restless, but he did not see what he was to say to help matters.

" Was your conversation a friendly one ? " asked the detective once more, in his quiet, patient tone, " or could it be said you quarrelled ? "

" He offered financial help, and I declined it," repeated Rollo, looking his questioner full in the face.

There was another pause. The detective seemed to be baffled by the answers he was getting, but he tried again.

" Were you generally on good terms with your uncle ? " he asked.

" I have said we did not often meet," was the reply.

" Now, Sir Rollo, I put it to you, for your own sake, are you treating me frankly ? You did not often meet

your uncle, and for some reason, unasked by you, he had come to offer you financial assistance. You had supper together. That, so far as we know, was the last meal and the last conversation your uncle had before he died. Have you nothing more to tell me about it ? "

" Nothing that will be of the slightest service to you."

Inspector Porter got up, closed his book and put it back in his pocket.

" Then I need detain you no longer," he said. " Your financial troubles are no doubt at an end now, as I believe you are your uncle's heir ? "

There was no reply to this remark and with a nod to Graham, Inspector Porter left the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE DINNER

THERE was a silence in the room for some minutes after the Inspector had gone. Rollo stood looking out of the window and Bruce seated himself in a big easy chair and lit another cigarette.

" What a wonderful thing this wireless is," he said after a time in his usual light tone, as though nothing out of the ordinary had been happening. " They broadcast a message at night and in the morning Porter can stroll in here apparently knowing all our movements. He's a good chap, Porter ; the cleanest and straightest 'tec I have ever come across, and one of the cutest."

" Bruce," said his friend, turning suddenly to him, " do you think I ought to have told him that I saw my uncle earlier in the evening, as well as when he called here ? "

" Well, if you ask me, old man, I think there was a good deal you might have told him. I'm not inquisitive myself, but these beggars have to be, and what you don't tell 'em they guess. Very likely they guess it wrong and that makes things worse."

"I can tell you, Spider, what I could not tell him. But it's a long story and it's a nightmare."

"Tell me if it will help, but I don't want to barge in."

"I want to tell you; that is why I asked you to come round. We have not had many secrets from one another, Spider, and if I didn't tell someone I should burst."

"Then let go the safety valve, old chap. Open her throttle and let it rip!"

"It really began a month ago. You know Joan turned me down?"

"I do, but I don't know why."

"Don't think she is to blame. She was quite right. She thought I was a waster, and in a way I was. Anyhow I've pretty well smashed up everything now."

"Is this the beginning of the story or the end? I am not quite getting the points."

"I'll soon make it clear. You know how my father left me—not a bob. Well, I was working on that patent and to see it through I had to borrow money. I went to Joe Levy. He let me have a thousand pounds first and then another five hundred. Peterson— he's the fellow who was working it with me—Peterson and I had just got the thing completed, and when we went with our models and specifications to get our patents, we found some other Johnnies had fixed up the whole thing just a week before. Every detail, just as we had worked it out. It was almost uncanny to see one's ideas anticipated to the smallest detail, and all the rights secured by the other fellows. It was a knock down blow. Peterson was so broken by

it that he cleared out to America, and I was left absolutely stony. Just twenty pounds left. Like a mad fool I put the lot on a horse at thirty to one to see if I could get a bit back. The horse was called Last Chance and I thought it sounded promising. The brute lived up to its name and never even finished.

"I told Joan I owed Levy fifteen hundred and had chucked the last twenty on a race, and she was furious with me. Quite rightly so. We had quarrelled before, over nothing, but it was my fault. My nerves were on edge. Then, when I told her I had blewed the money, she went quite quiet and gave me back my ring. I had never told her about the patent because I meant it to be such a big surprise. So the whole thing was ended—it was no use my talking about it then."

"I think Joan ought to know," said Bruce. "She's a real sport and would never go back on a pal because he had had bad luck."

"I know. All she could see was that I was hanging about, apparently doing nothing, and living on money-lenders and racing."

"It is not too late to tell her now."

"It is. You have no idea of the idiot I have been while you were away. I borrowed a bit more to get going again—after all I was apparently bound to get the Brannock estates some day, so it wasn't difficult. Far easier in fact to borrow than to get a job. Then I met Lilla Gayton. I seemed pretty nearly down and out. The patent business and the break with Joan left me done to the world. Uncle Nick might live to be eighty, and he wasn't

particularly fond of me. Lilla seemed a decent sort, and a bit out of luck, too. Somehow we consoled one another and—I didn't care much—I asked her to marry me."

"To marry you! And all this in a month! Why didn't you wire to me? I would have flown home like a shot."

"I wish to God I had! But I asked Lilla to marry me and how can I look Joan in the face after that? All in one month!"

"So you are engaged to this Miss Gayton?"

"No. Heaven be praised I am not! She threw me over."

"And all in the same month! Things seem to move while I am away!"

"This is where the story really begins. It was only last Friday that we got engaged, and on Saturday it was all over."

"Ye Gods! The quickest ever! Miss Gayton changed her mind?"

"The whole thing may seem mad to you, but Lilla is in many ways a charming girl, and I was crumpled up by the double knock-out over Joan and the patent. On Friday Lilla promised to marry me. We spent Saturday morning together. She said she could not dine with me, as a special friend—a girl who had acted with her a few years ago—was coming to see her that evening and she could not put her off. We arranged to meet at a cabaret at ten.

"Early in the evening I got a message from Wilberforce that a theatre party he had arranged had broken down and he was left with a box for the Vaudeville on his hands. He asked if I could use it. He said

if I could I might pick the ticket up on my way. He lives, you know, off the Adelphi.

" I thought perhaps Lilla would prefer the play to the cabaret and, if she liked, she could take her friend, too, instead of packing her home. I tried to get her on the telephone, but was told the line was out of order, so I jumped in a taxi and ran round. She has a flat in Victoria Street. It was rather late, but I meant to suggest that both girls should have dinner with me first."

Rollo stopped for a moment and moistened his lips. Bruce said nothing. He saw how upset his friend was and did not want to appear unsympathetic. He felt the story was nearing a climax that would make matters clearer. He was not wrong.

" When I got to the flat, Lilla was alone, but the table was set for two, prettily set and with a bottle of champagne at the side. Still all unsuspecting, I chaffed her about the good time she was giving her friend, and I told her about the theatre ticket, and asked if she would like to go. We were standing in the doorway of her sitting-room, almost in the little hall, when I heard a key slipped into the latch of the door. The lock turned, and a man entered. It only means one thing when a man admits himself with his own latch-key into a woman's flat. And that man was my Uncle Nicholas ! "

" Your—Uncle—Nicholas ? " Bruce repeated the words slowly. It was such an incredible thing. Sir Nicholas Brannock the philanthropist—and remembering what had happened later that night what was he further to hear ?

" I suppose it was a dramatic scene," Rollo went on

bitterly. " You might play it as a farce or as a melodrama. Lilla screamed, and I was almost too amazed to say anything. My uncle kept quite cool. He had gone too far to draw back, so he hung up his hat and said calmly : ' Shall we go into the room ? I did not expect to see my nephew Rollo here.'

" ' I did not expect to see you here ! ' I cried hotly. He smiled and said : ' I presume not. Perhaps Lilla will explain.'

" ' I would have you know, Sir,' I said, ' that I have asked this lady to marry me, and she has consented.'

" ' How sweet of you, how brave of her,' he replied in his slow ironical way. ' How unfortunate if anything should happen to upset the arrangement ! '

" ' You are my uncle,' I returned, ' and so I will only say this : the one thing for you to do is to go ! '

" ' Your view of the situation is not unreasonable,' he said, ' but should you not add that if I do not go, you must ? '

" ' Lilla,' I cried to the girl, who was standing there frightened and trembling, ' what have you to say to this man ? '

" ' Yes, what, Lilla ? ' he repeated mockingly. ' You will remember that my good nephew offers you marriage. He unfortunately has nothing else to offer you—unless his debts, which I believe are considerable, appeal to you ? I cannot offer you marriage, but I can give you everything else. The choice is yours. I stay here in any case, for reasons you will not dispute. You stay here with me or you go with him. Choose, Lilla.'

" He spoke in his jeering way to the end. He knew what her answer would be. She said nothing, but she pulled off the ring I had that morning given her and handed it to me. I let it fall. Twice had my betrothal ring been returned. This time I had been duped and fooled. Thank God, I made no scene and uttered no reproaches. I went out and left them there."

CHAPTER V

"WHAT CONCLUSION WOULD YOU DRAW?"

BRUCE GRAHAM had listened carefully to his friend's remarkable narrative, and when it stopped he made no comment for a considerable time. Many thoughts were running through his mind. How did this strange tale affect the question of the sudden death later that same night of Sir Nicholas? What would Inspector Porter think of it, if he heard about it? Was it wise—was it possible—that he should not hear about it? There was amazement, too, in his mind that the deceased baronet of whom men spoke so highly should have been carrying on this secret and disgraceful love affair. When he spoke it was to put a further question.

"What did you do when you left them?"

"I hardly know. I strode out of the place and dismissed my cab, and I walked—walked, I cannot tell you where I walked. I tried to think, but everything seemed confused. After a time I found myself in the Strand, and I decided to call on Wilberforce and tell him I could not use his tickets. I believe I wanted to tell him all that had happened. I felt I must tell someone, and you were away. I went to his rooms, but he was out. I said I would wait till he came back. I

did wait, but he did not come. Then, while I was there, light seemed to dawn in my mind. Of course I felt hurt and sore. My first rage was against my uncle. I had believed in Lilla and I regarded him as having betrayed her. Then I saw the matter more sanely. She had deceived me; he had not. That he should have such an affair disgusted me, for he posed as a righteous man, but he had not wronged me for he was not aware that I even knew Lilla. He might with some reason say I was robbing him. The treachery was on Lilla's part. She had accepted my offer of marriage while actually living as my uncle's mistress. She was to dine with him and then come to meet me! Her trickery sickened me. Indeed I had something to thank my uncle for. I saw what a fool I had been and what an escape I had had. I thought of Joan, and I knew she was the only girl I had ever loved, or could ever love. If I had lost her, I need not have made myself unworthy ever to see her again. Wilberforce did not come, so I went home.

" You waited in Wilberforce's room, in his work-room? " The questions were asked slowly, almost painfully.

" Yes."

" How long were you there? "

" I cannot say. Perhaps half an hour."

Bruce looked at him almost in consternation. Then he said:

" What happened next? "

" As I say, I came back here. I must have wandered round a bit, for I found it was nearly ten o'clock. I was just thinking what I should do when, to my surprise, my uncle walked in.

"As I have told you, my resentment against him had pretty well cooled down, but I was astonished at his following me like that. He started, however, to speak in a very friendly way and said he thought it was better for us to come to some understanding.

"'You see, my boy,' he said, 'it would be quite impossible for you to marry Lilla. She's a pleasing little girl, but she's not for you and she's not for marrying. Now, apparently, I made a good guess when I said you were hard up. Well, if that is so, let me help you and we will forget all about this little business.'

"He then suggested we should get some supper, and I remembered I had had no food all evening. So I agreed. He was as pleasant as he could be, and it seemed to me he was really saying, though not of course in so many words, 'leave me undisturbed with my little Lilla, tell no one about it, and I will make it worth your while!' Well, I was done with Lilla, that was clear enough, but I did not want his bribes and I was sick of the whole business. We talked all through supper, but I refused to have anything from him. Finally we parted, friendly enough outwardly. His last words were that I was to think it over and let him hear from me. I returned here and went to bed; but I could not sleep.

"I was fairly upset by the whole thing and I got up early the next morning—that is yesterday—and fetched my Vauxhall two-seater and scorched right across the country. It was after midnight when I got back, and I 'phoned you when I received the news this morning. So there you are."

"But, my dear Rollo, why did you not tell all this to Inspector Porter just now?"

"How could I? You do not suggest that I should blazon it abroad that I caught my uncle, whom the world regarded as a very upright man and a philanthropist, in an affair of that kind?"

"Sometimes the truth has to come out."

"No, Bruce, you can't mean it. That is why it was so difficult to answer that detective fellow's questions. Here is my uncle just dead—could I tell a thing like that about him? My aunt, of whom I am really fond, crushed with her sudden loss, and you ask that I should blurt out the tale of her dishonour. No, no. There are some things you cannot do."

"Now listen to me, Rollo. You know what our friend Wilberforce is?"

"What do you mean? Next to you he is my best pal."

"I know that; and by profession he is an analyst, one of our great toxicologists or poison experts."

"Well?"

"Can't you see where it leads us? For God's sake don't think I am unsympathetic or doubt a single word you've said. We are too old friends for that. But for you to call on Wilberforce was just the unluckiest thing imaginable."

"How do you mean? You do not suggest——?"

"I suggest nothing. I want you to see the matter as it will look to other people. Of course the whole business may be easily cleared up. Heaven grant it may be. But suppose it is not? Look at it as though it were someone else. Rich uncle and impecunious nephew meet unexpectedly at a lady's flat and quarrel over her. The nephew clears out and goes straightway to the workshop of one of the most noted toxi-

cologists in the country. He spends half an hour alone in a room that is stacked with poisons enough to kill all London. He then goes home. His uncle calls, and they go out to supper together. Whose suggestion it was we cannot tell. They part, and two or three hours later the uncle is found dead, and the doctors say he has been poisoned. What conclusion would you draw ? "

" But, Spider, no one could imagine——"

" And that is not all. When an Inspector from Scotland Yard called to make inquiries the nephew suppressed all mention of the early meeting, and the quarrel, and of his call at the poison factory. Add to that the fact that the impecunious nephew was heir to the estates of the rich uncle, and I ask again what conclusions do you draw ? "

" But, Spider, this is horrible. Of course they will find out how my uncle died. What do you think I ought to do ? "

" Come at once with me to Scotland Yard and tell Inspector Porter the rest of the story."

" But can I foul the name of my own uncle whom everyone respected, and aim such a blow at my aunt ? "

" You must, my boy. It may never be published, but if you suppress the truth and they find it out elsewhere—as you may be sure they will—your version will be discredited."

Rollo walked restlessly up and down the loftier part of his room, and Bruce waited patiently for his decision. He understood now why Rollo had fenced with the detective's questions, but he had seen the bad impression that fencing had given. He knew that Inspector

Porter was sure to ferret out more of the story, and, as he had said, the natural conclusion would not be a kindly one. He was considerably relieved when Rollo at last admitted that his view was right and asked if he would go with him to Scotland Yard. Bruce jumped up and in a few minutes they were on their way to the famous headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Arrived there they had a disappointment. They were informed Inspector Porter was away. They left a message asking him to ring up Sir Rollo directly he came back. But just as they were leaving, a taxi drew up and the Inspector jumped out.

"Oh, Porter," said Bruce, stepping towards him. "Sir Rollo wanted to see you. He has something more to tell you."

"I am not surprised at that," said the Inspector, looking coldly at the young baronet. "I have just been talking with Miss Gayton."

CHAPTER VI

THE INQUEST

SLOANE SQUARE is a choice example of London's muddled architecture. It is odd in shape and odd in every detail. Its buildings are of all styles and all sizes. Next to a bank, fronted half in stone and half in terra-cotta, a hotel in red-brick sprawls over what once were independent shops. At the corner comes a sample of mid-Victorian yellow-brick. Across the way, a public-house reverts to red-brick and stone, and next to it a theatre adopts similar materials, but carefully avoids the slightest resemblance in style. A stunted railway station adjoins; then there is the lofty Willett building in solid masonry, and then another spasm of dirty red-brick. For a final variety the fourth side boasts an elevation of grey paint or stucco.

As Ned Lamport had remarked, it is a square that possesses no iron railings and no attempt at a garden, being more like a continental *place* than a typical London square. The traversing roadways from Knightsbridge and Chelsea cut the cement paving into irregular shapes, and on one of these there is generally a group of people waiting for the next omnibus. They stand near to the memorial cross,

and not a few who waited there pointed to the spot between the cross and the fountain where the body of Sir Nicholas Brannock had been found. But as yet public interest in the matter was not fully aroused. The passing of a notable man is observed with a vague regret. It needs to be a very notable man or a very remarkable passing to stir more than a mild interest in our busy world. Yet the day was coming when the name of Sir Nicholas would be on every lip, when hundreds of people would journey across the wide metropolis merely to see the spot where he fell.

There was not a large attendance of the outside public at the Coroner's inquest, but the friends, relations, and dependents of the dead man, together with the various officials and witnesses connected with the case, nearly filled the court. Sir Rollo Brannock, the new baronet, was there with his friend, Bruce Graham. Ned Lamport accompanied them.

Rollo glanced round several times before the proceedings commenced to see if Miss Lilla Gayton was present, but he was not able to perceive her. His little party, however, was joined by George Tempest, the man who had married his sister Dorothy. Tempest was an immaculate individual who wore an eyeglass and spoke very slowly. His utterances seldom justified the care he seemed to bestow on them.

"Dam' silly business this," he murmured to his brother-in-law, as he sat by his side. "Most annoyin'. Uncle Nick is dead. Why can't they bury him without worryin' whether he had a heart attack or a fatal fall? What good will it do anyhow? Dorothy made me run up. She and Ernest and Daphne are comin' for the funeral. I hope the old buffer will get a move

on." The last portion of his remarks referred, of course, to the Coroner and not to his deceased relative.

Rollo asked how his sister Dorothy was, and whether George had seen his other sister and her husband, Ernest Benniken, lately. Before George Tempest was ready with his reply there was a cry of "Silence" and the Coroner entered to open his inquiry.

After the swearing of the jury, and the usual formalities, the first witness was called. This was Mr. Septimus Ruskin, of Calrow and Ruskin, the solicitors to the late baronet. He identified the body as that of Sir Nicholas Brannock, who had been a client of his for twenty years and whom he had interviewed the previous week, when he appeared to be in his usual health.

The next witness was Dr. Sarbleton, of Cadogan Place, who confirmed the identification and said he had attended Sir Nicholas and his wife for many years.

"When did you last see Sir Nicholas?" asked the Coroner.

"On the Friday preceding his death," was the reply.

"Did he then seem in perfect health?"

"Absolutely. It was not a professional visit."

"When did you last see him professionally?"

"Six months ago; a matter of a chill."

"Would you consider Sir Nicholas a healthy man?"

"Decidedly so."

"Had he, so far as you are aware, ever suffered from either vertigo or heart weakness?"

"So far as I am aware, never."

"Had he ever shown any symptoms of depression, or suffered from insomnia?"

"To my knowledge, never. I should have

described him for his years, as exceptionally sound in body and mind."

He then stood down and was succeeded by Bruce Graham, who told briefly how he and his friend had discovered the body of the dead man. He was asked to describe its exact position and appearance when found, and he gave the best replies he could. The Hon. Edward Lamport corroborated his statement, and one or two witnesses followed and gave evidence of a more or less formal character.

Then Edward Marsh was called, and a typical English man-servant of the better class stepped into the box. He was clean-shaven, except for an inch or so of white whisker. He was stoutly built, but held himself well. He wore deep mourning.

In reply to the Coroner's questions he said he was butler in the household of the late baronet. He had been forty years in the family's employment, having started as an under-footman. He had seen the body and recognised it as that of his late master.

"When did you last see Sir Nicholas alive?" the Coroner asked.

"On Saturday evening."

"Do you know the hour?"

"It was seven o'clock precisely. I was in the hall and I opened the door as Sir Nicholas went out. As I closed it the clock struck."

"Had Sir Nicholas told you he was going out at seven?"

"Yes, Sir, and, if I may say so, he was always remarkably punctual."

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No, Sir."

" You knew he was dining out ? "

" Yes, Sir."

" When next did you see him ? "

" About three o'clock the next morning. The police came round and fetched me. I was taken to the mortuary and I recognised Sir Nicholas." The poor fellow's voice broke, but he did his utmost to preserve his composure. The Coroner paused for a moment, then he asked :

" Did you hear anything of your master between the time when he went out and the time when you were afterwards fetched to identify him ? "

" I did."

" Will you tell me what it was ? "

" When Sir Nicholas went out he told me he would return at half-past ten. His valet was away on holiday and I was attending to him. About half-past ten he telephoned and said he would not be home at the time mentioned and I need not wait up for him."

" You do not know where he telephoned from ? "

" No, Sir."

" And you did not wait up ? "

" As a matter of fact I waited till twelve. I then retired."

" And you were disturbed at about three ? "

" Yes, Sir."

These replies were all duly noted, and then the Coroner resumed :

" Now, Marsh. I want you to tell me as far as you can how Sir Nicholas spent that last day, the Saturday."

" He had breakfast in his room as usual. He rose about 9.30 and went out at eleven. He returned for

lunch, which he had with her ladyship at 1.30. He spent the afternoon in his own room and tea was served to him there. He dressed at six-thirty and left the house at seven."

"All his earlier meals then were taken at home as usual?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Did he have anything before he went out in the evening?"

"Yes, Sir, a sherry and bitters. I prepared it for him myself and one for her ladyship also."

"You gave it to him?"

"Yes, Sir."

"That was just before seven and you were expecting him back at ten-thirty?"

"Yes, Sir."

"At ten-thirty he telephoned that he would be late. He did not say why?"

"No. He only told me not to wait for him."

"And did his voice, his manner, so far as you could judge it, seem natural and normal?"

"Quite, Sir."

"The next time you saw him was at the mortuary!"

"Yes, Sir."

"Was there anything when you saw Sir Nicholas, or anything that had happened earlier in the day, that would to your mind account in any way for his sudden death?"

"No, Sir." The man's voice broke again and there were tears in his eyes.

"Now will you tell me this, was it usual or unusual for Sir Nicholas to return home after midnight?"

"When Sir Nicholas was in and was not entertain-

ing, he retired early. When he went out, he generally returned between twelve and one."

"Was he often out?"

"I dare say three nights a week, Sir."

"Did he keep a motor car?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Did he not use it in the evenings?"

"No, Sir. Her ladyship generally used the car, and Sir Nicholas said if the man had been out in the day he would not keep him up at night. He was a most considerate master."

"When he was late how did Sir Nicholas usually return?"

"By taxi-cab. He used cabs a great deal, but he sometimes walked."

"You mean he sometimes walked at night?"

"Yes, Sir. I have known him walk home from his club on a fine night."

"Where was his club?"

"In Pall Mall, Sir. The Ajax Club."

"He was found in Sloane Square. If he was walking home would not Sloane Square be out of his way?"

"I think not, Sir. Along the Mall, past Buckingham Palace, up to Eaton Square, and it is a straight line through Eaton Square and Sloane Square to the bottom of Cadogan Gardens. Our house is almost in Cadogan Gardens."

"You suggest Sir Nicholas might have been returning that way?"

"Yes, Sir."

Again there was a pause as this was noted down, then the inquiry proceeded:

" After your visit to the mortuary you returned to Cadogan Square ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Did anything happen then ? "

" The household had been disturbed. They had found Sir Nicholas was absent and some of them were waiting up for me. When I got back her ladyship came down and asked me what had happened." He paused a moment and cleared his throat. Then he added huskily : " When I told her, she said : ' God's Will,' or something like that and fell in a faint at my feet. We sent at once for Dr. Sarbleton."

" Lady Brannock is an invalid, I believe ? "

" Yes, Sir."

" Now, Marsh, just one thing more. Did your master generally enjoy good health ? "

" Yes, Sir."

" Had he, so far as you know, been subject to fits or heart attacks ? "

" Never, Sir."

" Have you ever heard of his feeling faint or suffering from vertigo—that is, attacks of giddiness ? "

" Never, Sir."

" Had he been worried, or shown any signs of depression ? "

" Not at all, Sir."

" So far as you could judge he was enjoying good normal health ? "

" Certainly, Sir."

The interest of those present in court had been considerably quickened by the replies to the last few questions. If Sir Nicholas did not owe his death to any of the causes generally assumed to be responsible

for it—and both the doctor and the butler seemed agreed on that point—what had the real cause been? Neither the butler nor the doctor had ever heard of attacks likely to cause such a sudden collapse, and these troubles if they exist generally give warnings before they reach serious and dangerous stages. There must be something more to come. When Marsh left the witness box they waited eagerly to see who would be called next. The Coroner, however, quietly remarked that, as the medical experts who were conducting the post-mortem examination were not yet ready with their report, he would adjourn the inquiry for a week.

The assembled company broke up into several groups as they departed. Speculations were rife as to what was suspected. Most of them had come expecting brief and formal proceedings to result in the usual verdict of death from natural causes. If a prolonged post-mortem examination was being made, it suggested that something extraordinary had happened. Many were the theories put forward.

"What has the Johnnie got in his mind?" George Tempest asked his brother-in-law, as with Graham and Lamport they left the court. "It's most disagreeable for the family for the thing to be draggin' on like this. I suppose the fellow wants to get into the papers. Disgustin' business altogether."

Rollo made no reply, but, feeling that some hospitality was due to a relative who had come up from the country, he asked him to join them at lunch. As they went along, Bruce Graham managed for a moment to get a quiet word with his friend.

"I have had a little pow-wow with Inspector Porter," he said, "and I am afraid the whole thing

has got to come out. Porter was not too friendly, but says it is out of his hands now. What I want to know is, have you seen Joan ? "

" No. How can I ? "

" Well, she ought to be told. Suppose all that business about Lilla Gayton comes out in court and she is unprepared for it, what will she think ? "

" What will she think anyhow ? " asked Rollo miserably.

" I don't know. But I do think it is fair to warn her, and I want you to let me do it."

" You're a good chap, Spider. Do as you think best."

CHAPTER VII

AFTER THE FUNERAL

MOST of the papers the next morning were content to publish the report of the early stages of the Brannock inquest without comment. One of them, however, the *Daily Picture*, having perhaps a keener eye for possible sensation than some of its rivals, startled its readers with the bold head-lines right across the page: "The Sloane Square Mystery. How did Sir Nicholas Brannock die?" Then in smaller type it answered its own inquiry: "'Not from natural causes,' say the Doctor and the Butler."

It reported the case in full and it interlined the evidence with cross headings of its own, such as "Where did Sir Nicholas dine?" and "Did he walk home?"

On its illustrated pages it gave views of Sloane Square, showing the memorial and the fountain and indicating with a cross the spot where the body was found. Photographs of the dead baronet and of his successor in title were inset. It told its readers that remarkable developments might be expected.

All this had the effect of exciting public interest in the case, and doubtless there would have been a

huge attendance at the funeral had not the family arranged for this to be conducted privately and in the quietest possible manner. A public memorial service was, however, held at the same time at a fashionable church in Sloane Street.

That service was very largely attended. Royalty was represented and so were the various institutions in which Sir Nicholas had been interested. Friends and neighbours from the surrounding streets and squares poured in, and there was hardly a vacant seat in the vast building.

Bruce Graham arrived a little late—as a man naturally would do who lived just on the spot—and got into a pew in the high back gallery. As he listened to the service he wondered what all these people would be saying of Sir Nicholas in a few days' time if they heard, as it seemed likely they must hear, of the double life he had been leading. He asked himself rather cynically how many men, held in the highest repute by their fellows, could afford to have the secrets of their lives laid bare. He had just been reading the anonymous reminiscences of an unpleasant individual who at one time apparently held a position of confidence in the British Embassy at Paris, and who, in his old age, was making money by raking over the muck heap of his unfortunately retentive memory. The things that this writer admitted he ought not to tell suggested that there was hardly a person in society in his day who did not lead a vicious life. Such things might be true, but Bruce wondered if any good come of publishing them—except to the individual who bespattered the family records of his friends for his own gain.

After the service was over he chatted with various acquaintances at the church door, and then walked up the street with Mr. Wedderburn, Joan and Auntie Angela.

"Are there any new developments?" his uncle inquired.

"I do not think so," said Bruce. "Various rumours are floating about, but the authorities decline to say anything until the inquest is resumed."

"I want to call on poor Lady Brannock," said Auntie Angela, "but I do not quite know when I ought to go. I inquired yesterday. They said she was a little better."

"She was not going to the funeral," said Bruce. "Rollo told me he was returning to Cadogan Square afterwards, and so were the Tempests and Major and Mrs. Bennikin."

"It is a very painful time for them all," remarked Mr. Wedderburn. "How thankful they will be when it is over."

As they crossed the street, Bruce manœuvred Joan a little behind the older folk, whispering he had something important to tell her. He asked if she would be free in the evening.

"Not to-night," she said. "It is my evening with my boys."

"Then come now and have lunch somewhere."

"All right," she replied. "If you will wait a moment while I put on something less mournful. Auntie Ange insisted on my wearing all black. It makes me feel miserable without doing Sir Nicholas a scrap of good."

No objection was raised to the young cousins going

off together, and as they ran in a taxi towards Piccadilly, Bruce remarked :

" You know, Joan, it's rather hard to visualise you as a good little Sunday school teacher."

" I can't say about the good little, but my boys are the duckiest little devils on earth. I would not give them up for anything. Grace Raeton always laughs at my going there on Sundays and Thursdays when she is dancing, but why not if I enjoy it ? As to dancing, I can dance her feet off if it comes to it. I give her a stroke a hole at golf and she's no earthly use at tennis, so I think I get the best of it all round."

" Yes, but how do you swallow Jonah and the whale, and all of that ? "

" I don't. Miss Carson complained to the Vicar that I was unorthodox, but he's a dear old thing and just grinned at her. He told her my boys were the quietest in the school and the cleanest, so he couldn't interfere. That's my job, to keep them clean."

It was not until they had finished their meal in a secluded corner of the restaurant that Bruce opened the subject he wanted to talk to her about. She refused the cigarette he offered her.

" Not smoking ? " he asked in surprise.

" I want to fiendishly, but it's a bet."

" Who with ? "

" Two of my kids. They are too young to smoke and I've sworn with crossed fingers to keep off it for a year if they will."

" Rather heroic," said Bruce, putting his own cigarette back in the case.

" No, you must smoke," she said, " I don't want

it made too easy. Now, what do you want to tell me ? "

" I'll have a cigar. Perhaps that won't be so tantalising. It's about Rollo."

Her heart beat a little faster, although it was the answer she had expected. She pressed her lips more firmly together and looked steadily at him without speaking.

" I am afraid Rollo is in trouble."

" How ? "

" There is no doubt that Sir Nicholas was poisoned and his last meal was with Rollo, just a few hours before."

" But no one would be so absurd as to suppose that Rollo did it."

" They might," and he told her the whole story of that Saturday evening, beginning with the surprise call at Lilla Gayton's flat, mentioning the visit at Wilberforce's rooms and ending with the supper at the Critz. " Of course we don't know yet what the doctors have to say, but the police are still very suspicious."

" What is this Lilla Gayton like ? " she asked, when he had finished.

" I have never seen her. But you know, Joan, I think you treated him rather badly."

" I did ? "

" Yes. Why did you throw him over ? "

" I will tell you. He told me he had no money, and I said he ought to get a job. He always laughed and said he would soon. I didn't worry much about such things, but if I mentioned it he always put me off. Then one day we had a tiff over something, and it came

out that not only had he got no money, but he had been living by borrowing from Joe Levy—that awful man who broke Lord John Randall, Jock as we called him, and drove poor Jock to suicide because he could not pay. Rollo knew all about that, yet he borrowed from him and he threw away the rest of the money racing. I'm not a prude, Bruce, but I've no use for a man like that—and he had been humbugging me all the time."

There was a suspicion of a quiver in her voice as she concluded, but she did not show any sign of relenting.

" Now, look here, Joan. Do you know why he had no money ? "

" His father left him none."

" This is so. Old Cornelius Brannock made a big mistake. He was quite comfortably off and while he was alive he allowed Rollo a thousand a year. Cornelius was heir to his brother Nicholas, and of course Rollo was *his* heir. The Brannock estates were entailed, so Cornelius said : ' Rollo is bound to get them when I go, therefore he is provided for. I will leave everything to my two daughters.' Unfortunately the old boy made his will himself. If he had gone to a lawyer, the lawyer would have pointed out two things ; first, if Lady Brannock died Sir Nicholas might marry again and have an heir, in which case neither of them would get anything. Secondly, if he, Cornelius, died before his older brother did, Rollo would be left high and dry until Sir Nicholas died too. Probably old Cornelius regarded his will as a temporary one to be altered if occasion arose. As it turned out, he died suddenly two years ago and Rollo

was stranded. Allowance stopped and everything willed away."

"But surely Rollo's sisters would be fair?"

"They are married. There was some talk of an arrangement, but Tempest and Bennikin were very snuffy about it. Expenses were increasing, death duties were heavy, the will was the will, and so on. Rollo is independent and rather impetuous. He couldn't beg from them. He said if they would lend him just six months allowance he would get something to do and would pay it back. This is why he had no money."

"But he did not get anything to do," said the girl.

"There you are not quite right. Rollo ought to have told you. It is a great pity he did not, but of course he could not be certain about things and he wanted it to be such a big surprise for you. I knew, but no one else did. He was working with a chap named Peterson on a patent automatic coupling for railway trucks. It is a thing that is badly wanted, and if it was successful there would be a fortune in it. Think of the thousands and thousands of railway wagons there are in this country and all over the world. They all want these automatic couplings and no one has been able to work it out quite successfully. Rollo and Peterson thought they had got it, but it is expensive work. It is not merely a matter of models and diagrams. You've got to test it in operation, and that means buying or hiring trucks and locomotives. And you have got to do it in secret. That is why he had to borrow from Joe Levy. After working at it for months and months they got it perfected. Then, when they went to get their patents, they found

someone else had forestalled them by a few days and had got all the rights in an idea absolutely identical with theirs. It was a knock down blow to them. Then Rollo had this split with you."

"But why—why did he not tell me?"

"I asked him that, and he said it would do no good to tell you he was a failure. He owed the money to Joe Levy and had nothing to show for it. He was crumpled up."

"But—but—need he have gone to—to Miss Gayton?"

"This is the pity of it. But you must try not to think hardly of him. If he wants help—if he wants a pal—can we count on you?"

"I—I think so."

Bruce did not press the matter further. He gave her hand a little squeeze and hoped he had done a good turn for his best friend. It was not until two or three days later that he met him. He thought him looking worn and worried, as though he had been suffering from sleepless nights.

"I shall be so thankful when this business is over," said the young baronet. "Everything seems unsettled and everyone is uneasy. The newspapers have set people talking. I called on Septimus Ruskin, my uncle's solicitor, and discussed matters with him. I told him what had passed on the Saturday evening between my uncle and myself, and asked if he would look after things for me in connection with the estate and so on. He was very polite, cursedly polite. He said his firm had always dealt with the affairs of the estate and he hoped they always might, but, as he represented the executors of Sir Nicholas under

his will, he thought I should have an independent solicitor to advise me until matters were in order. He gave me a letter of introduction to a man called Querit, of Querit and Proxton, and he is going to look into things for me."

"Is he a decent sort?"

"I suppose he is what is called a smart man; I don't much like him. Perhaps Ruskin did not want to send me to anyone likely to create permanent attachment! I told Querit about my supper with my uncle and the rest of the beastly business, and he rubbed his hands together and said 'Quite so, quite so. I must represent you at the inquest.' Thank the Lord it will soon be over."

"Anyway I have one bit of good news for you," said Bruce, and he told of his conversation with Joan and of the new light he had been able to put on things. "If it were not for the Lilla Gayton episode," he added, "I would almost say the trouble was past. But Joan is only a woman, bless her. For you to find consolation so quickly elsewhere is a thing that must take a bit of getting over."

"I know," replied his friend. "I was mad. I cannot explain it even to myself. You are a good chap, Bruce. I will see Joan when things are straight."

"Do; but don't rush it, my boy. Give her time. What else have you been doing?"

"I had tea one afternoon with my aunt Catherine in Cadogan Square. She was very sweet and was kinder to me than anyone else has been. She is still kept to her room. Another day I met my two sisters and their husbands there. We had a family discussion, but it was about as useful as such pow-wows generally

are. Of course, affairs are very simple. The entailed property passes to me and the rest to Aunt Catherine for life and then to be divided between my two sisters. There are no other near relations."

"Any bequests to charity?"

"No, Uncle Nick says he gave according to his means in his lifetime and it is for those who come after to do the same. But one thing I must tell you, Spider."

"What is that?"

"Each time I called at Cadogan Square I noticed, as I went in, a man hanging about on the opposite side of the road. When I came out he was still there. When I went to Querit's office he was following me. In fact, wherever I go he's there. It's rather horrible, but I know now what it means. I am being shadowed by the police. Pleasant, isn't it? Anyway it must be all right soon."

"Of course it must," said Bruce with a heartiness he hoped had no sound of misgiving in it.

CHAPTER VIII

WILFUL MURDER

WHEN the Coroner's Court re-assembled to continue the hearing of the Brannock case it presented a very different appearance to that at its first opening. There was a big crowd of the general public striving to gain admission and there was a much larger attendance of witnesses; but it was in the psychological atmosphere that there was the greatest change. No one now expected the proceedings to be of a purely formal character. The work of the *Daily Picture* had been well done, and it was felt something startling and dramatic was to happen, although no one seemed to know exactly what to expect. Even in the manner of the Coroner there was a briskness that had been lacking before. It seemed as though he now saw how the business had to be tackled, and he was going straight through with it.

As at the previous hearing, Rollo, Bruce and Ned Lamport were together, and with them this time were both of Rollo's brothers-in-law, George Tempest and Ernest Bennikin. Mr. Querit, the solicitor, was in a front row with other legal and official personages.

Inspector Porter was the first to go into the box.

He said that thanks to the prompt response to the inquiries by wireless and in the press, he was able to give a detailed account of Sir Nicholas Brannock's movements on the evening of the fatal Saturday. He had prepared it at the Coroner's wish in the form of a time-table, and the various witnesses necessary would be called to prove the details. The time-table was :

7.0 p.m.	Sir Nicholas left his home in Cadogan Square.
7.5 p.m.	He called at a house in Hans Place, but did not enter.
7.30 p.m.	Arrived at The Ajax Club, Pall Mall, and left again almost at once.
7.45 p.m.	Arrived at a flat in 357 Victoria Street.
9.15 p.m.	Left the flat.
10.0 p.m.	He reached the chambers of his nephew Sir Rollo Brannock in Ryder Street, St. James's.
10.20 p.m.	Arrived with his nephew at the Critz Restaurant.
10.30 p.m.	Telephoned to his house.
11.25 p.m.	Left the Critz alone.
11.30 to 12.30 p.m.	At the Ajax Club.
12.30 p.m.	Left the Club on foot.
1.15 a.m.	Found dead in Sloane Square.

The Inspector quitted the box and various taxi-cabmen, porters and others, gave brief evidence swearing to the detail that concerned them.

George Jones said he was on the rank opposite the Ajax Club and he was called at about 7.30 and took the deceased to 357 Victoria Street. He knew

Sir Nicholas as he had driven him before. He had seen the inquiry in the newspaper and at once informed the police.

Henry Waller said he was hailed by the deceased at a little before ten at Piccadilly Circus and drove him to Ryder Street, St. James's. There he was kept waiting for some time and got into conversation with the lift boy, who told him his fare was Sir Nicholas Brannock and he had gone up to see his nephew. A little later the two gentlemen came out together and he drove them to the Critz Restaurant. He thought no more about the matter till he got home late on Sunday night when his wife, who had a crystal wireless set, told him about the inquiry for Sir Nicholas. He notified the police the next day.

Ex-Serjeant Talbot, head porter at the Ajax Club, said Sir Nicholas arrived at about 7.30 and left immediately after. He returned at 11.30 and stayed for an hour. When Sir Nicholas was leaving he asked if he might call a cab for him, but Sir Nicholas said he would walk, remarking that he seemed to have a touch of indigestion and thought the walk would do him good. There was a wireless installed in the Club, and his information had been telephoned to Scotland Yard within three minutes of the broadcasting of their message.

Henri Verquer, a waiter at the Critz, said he had served supper to Sir Nicholas and the gentleman with him. Soon after he arrived Sir Nicholas had asked him where the telephone room was. He had recognised the deceased gentleman from the portrait in the *Daily Picture* and he identified his companion in the court.

Some similar evidence having been given to prove

the accuracy of the time-table the Coroner had copies of it handed to the jury, as he said he thought it would assist them in following the details of the case.

Sir Rollo was then called. The Coroner asked him if he wished to give evidence. On his replying in the affirmative he was sworn, and the Coroner said:

"I want you to tell me in your own words exactly what happened at your meetings with your uncle, Sir Nicholas Brannock, on the evening of Saturday, October the 19th.

Rollo was a little pale, but in a quiet firm voice he told the story of his call on his fiancée, Miss Gayton, with the offer of the theatre ticket; of the arrival of his uncle and the scene that followed. Of his departure from the flat, his wandering in the streets and his call at the rooms of his friend, Dr. Wilberforce. He described his return to his own home and his surprise when his uncle followed him there. He mentioned the offer of financial assistance made during the supper at the Critz and his refusal of it. He described the meal and said he and his uncle parted amicably, Sir Nicholas appearing at the time in normal health.

His evidence was followed with breathless interest by the crowded court. So Sir Nicholas Brannock the lauded philanthropist was leading a double life, and the lady he secretly loved had become engaged to his own nephew! The papers were right in promising them some sensations.

Then the Coroner put some questions.

"I think, Sir Rollo, you made a statement to the police when they called on you to make inquiries?

"I did."

"In that statement you told of your supper with

your uncle, but omitted to mention your earlier meeting at Miss Gayton's flat and your quarrel there? You also omitted to mention your call at Dr. Wilberforce's rooms?"

"That is so."

"Why was that?"

"I did not see at the time that it affected matters, and I hesitated to make statements not creditable to my uncle."

"But later you gave that information—why did you do so?"

"A friend pointed out to me that my silence might be misunderstood."

"So then you made a complete statement?"

"Yes."

"Now your statement was *not* complete. In neither of your conversations with the police, nor in the account of the matter you have just given us, did you mention that Sir Nicholas left you for a few minutes after the supper was ordered and went to the telephone, why did you say nothing about that?"

"In the first place I forgot it To-day, it has already been mentioned."

"Was the food for Sir Nicholas and his wine on the table during his absence?"

"I believe it was."

There was a pause as though the Coroner wished the significance of that fact to be appreciated. Then he resumed.

"Dr. Wilberforce is an old friend of yours?"

"He is."

"You know, therefore, that he is a great authority on poisons, and in his laboratory keeps poisons?"

" I do know it, but my friendship with him is social, not professional. He had offered me a theatre ticket and I called to say I could not use it."

" He was out. How long did you stay in the laboratory ? "

" I do not know. Perhaps fifteen minutes."

" If you only wanted to say you could not use his theatre ticket a message would have done—you need not have gone in at all ? "

" That is true ; but I was upset, and I wanted to see him."

" Now, Sir Rollo Brannock, I put this to you. Can you suggest any way in which your Uncle, Sir Nicholas Brannock, can have taken poison, if it is shown that he in fact died from poisoning ? "

" I cannot."

" That is all," said the Coroner gravely, but before Rollo could leave the box, his solicitor, Querit, was on his feet.

" With your permission, Sir, I will ask a question. When you left your Uncle at Miss Gayton's flat, Sir Rollo, did you know, had you any reason to believe, you would see him again that night ? "

" I had no reason to think I should see him again that night. I was much surprised when he called on me."

" Did you expect to see him at any early date ? "

" I did not. I felt I never wanted to see him again."

" Thank you."

The next witness called was Miss Lilla Gayton. There was a buzz of interest as she stepped into the box. She was handsomely dressed in black with a large hat and a dark fur stole. She had good features

and large blue eyes. She was pale, her cheeks were thickly powdered, and her lips were unnaturally red.

" You have heard," said the Coroner, when she had been sworn, " you have heard the account given by Sir Rollo Brannock of the encounter between himself and his uncle at your flat on the night of Saturday the 19th. Is that account true ? "

" It is," she spoke softly, rather nervously.

" Is it true, that the day before, you had become engaged to Sir Rollo ? "

" It is."

" What were the relations between yourself and Sir Nicholas ? "

There was no reply. The Coroner waited a few moments and then repeated the question.

" They were what you would expect," came the answer at last, in an even lower tone.

" You mean you were living under the protection of Sir Nicholas ? "

" Yes."

" How could you, being under the protection of Sir Nicholas, become engaged to marry his nephew ? "

"Is it not better to marry ? " came the low voice. There was a slight titter in court at the reply and the Coroner frowned.

" If it is better to marry, why did you break with Sir Rollo and stay with his Uncle ? "

The woman gave no answer and the Coroner made a gesture as though to imply her motives were not of much moment. Then he said :

" Sir Nicholas stayed and had dinner with you ? "

" He did."

"Tell us of what the meal consisted and who prepared it."

It appeared to have been a simple repast in which a boiled chicken had been the principal item. Everything had been cooked in the flat by Miss Gayton's maid. The three of them had shared the fare and neither of the women suffered any ill-effects.

"What had Sir Nicholas to say to you when his nephew had gone?"

"He—forgave me."

"Did he appear to feel resentment against his nephew?"

"I do not think so."

"Did he make any reference to him?"

"He said he would see him and put things right."

"When the nephew left the flat did his Uncle say anything about meeting him later on?"

The girl hesitated.

"Answer me. When these two men were parting was anything said as to their meeting again?"

"Yes."

"Who said it?"

"Sir Nicholas."

"What did he say?"

"I am not sure of the exact words. It was to the effect that they must come to an understanding later."

"By later do you mean later that night, or at some future date?"

"I don't know."

"You mean it might have meant either?"

"Yes."

There were a few more questions of no great importance and then Mr. Querit jumped up.

" Now, Miss Gayton, we may I suppose take it that your fiancé was very upset when his Uncle arrived ? "

" He was."

" He had offered you honourable marriage ? "

" He had," this in a very low tone.

" And the revelation of the way in which you were living was a great shock to him ? "

There was no answer, but the solicitor took it she acquiesced.

" As a result," he proceeded, " there was an angry scene which terminated in Sir Rollo's departure."

" Yes."

" Now, Miss Gayton, I put it to you ; if there was this angry parting it is quite clear there was no arrangement for any future meeting ? "

" There was no arrangement."

" Ah, you said just now that Sir Nicholas suggested they should meet later on. That was a mistake ? "

" No."

" Then will you please explain."

" Sir Nicholas said what I said he said," the girl answered rather confusedly, " but Sir Rollo did not reply."

" You mean Sir Rollo did not hear ? "

" She cannot tell us what Sir Rollo heard," interrupted the Coroner.

" Very well, Sir," said Querit deferentially. " Now I suggest to you," he added to the girl, " that nothing was said then as to a future meeting, but you are thinking of what Sir Nicholas said to you after his nephew had gone ? "

" I don't think so."

Rose Darlow, Miss Gayton's maid, followed her into

the box and gave confirmatory evidence as to the meal of which Sir Nicholas had partaken.

A statement was then given by Lord Liverdale, who said he had been in the smoking-room of the Ajax Club on the night in question and had had a long talk with the deceased baronet. Sir Nicholas had perhaps appeared a little restless, but otherwise in normal health. They had one drink together, a whisky and soda, before parting.

Then there was some stir in court, for Sir Evan Leadenhall was called, and everyone knew he was the great chemist and analyst attached to the Home Office. Now they were to receive definite information on the point that made all that had gone before of enormous importance, or worth nothing at all.

Sir Evan was sworn and the Coroner briefly mentioned his qualifications.

" Sir Evan, you have, I believe, made an examination of the organs of the late Sir Nicholas Brannock. Will you please tell the jury and myself the result of that examination ? "

" I found that Sir Nicholas had undoubtedly died from a neurotic poison. At first I was a little in doubt as to the precise poison employed. Certain features were symptomatic of hydrocyanic acid, but there were other contrary indications. After analysis I found the poison used was oil of mirbane, better known perhaps as nitro-benzol."

The crowded court had listened breathlessly to this brief statement. Now the truth was proclaimed. Sir Nicholas had been poisoned. Many of those present took but little notice of the technical questions that followed, as to the organs examined and the quantity

of poison discovered. They were trying to work out for themselves what this really meant.

"What," the Coroner was asking, "What are the symptoms of poisoning by nitro-benzol?"

"The symptoms are dilation of the pupils of the eyes, irregular convulsive movements of the body, and the rhythm of respiratory movements is disturbed. When prussic acid is used, these symptoms occur almost immediately. Where oil of mirbane is employed they may be deferred for some hours and then come on quite suddenly."

"Will you tell the jury the characteristics of oil of mirbane?"

"In its usual form it is a colourless liquid with an almond taste and odour. It is employed in the manufacture of certain explosives but has other uses. Fifteen drops would be a fatal dose."

"Having regard to the amount of this poison found in the organs, how long do you think might have elapsed between the time it was taken and the time of death?"

"Probably between two and two and a half hours."

"So that if Sir Nicholas died, as we know he did," said the Coroner very deliberately, "at about one o'clock, the poison was probably taken at or soon after ten thirty?"

The analyst bowed his assent, and almost everyone in the Court turned and looked at Rollo Brannock who, with pale face and fixed eyes, was staring as though mesmerised at the form of the cold scientist whose quiet evidence seemed so irresistible.

"Could oil of mirbane be swallowed in drink or could solid food be treated with it?"

" Either. In drink it might be perceptible ; less so perhaps in some highly seasoned dish."

" Jugged hare ! " murmured someone in an audible whisper at the back of the Court, remembering details given by Rollo himself of the Critz supper. He was immediately reproved with a cry of " Silence ! "

" Is it in your view consistent with poisoning at the time and with the drug mentioned that Sir Nicholas might have walked home after 12.30 as far as Sloane Square, and then collapsed ? "

" Entirely consistent. It is just what might be expected to happen in a case of a man of strong will deciding to walk home."

There were a few more medical and technical questions and then Mr. Querit jumped up.

" One point, Sir Evan, I wish to be clear upon. If Sir Nicholas died of nitro-benzol poisoning, is it not a fact that the action of the poison would be affected by many outside circumstances ? I refer to the contents of the stomach at the time poison was taken, the state of health of the individual, his mental preoccupations, and whether he remained sedentary or went for a walk ? "

" Some of those things would undoubtedly have an effect."

" So that the drug might have been taken at say nine o'clock instead of ten thirty."

" I am not prepared to say that that is impossible, but I think it unlikely."

The next witness called was Dr. Harold Wilberforce. His manner as he entered the box was in striking contrast to that of his fellow expert who had just left it. Leadenhall had spoken as an analyst dealing

precisely with grains of drugs and actions of poisons. He was a scientist and the consequence to others of his experiments and the deductions therefrom was not his affair. With Wilberforce the personal element was strong. He had heard all the evidence and he saw the peril that confronted his friend. How could he help him? When he had been sworn, the Coroner mentioned his degrees and qualifications.

"You are, I believe, a professor of toxicology and the Home Office occasionally invites your help in special cases?"

"That is so."

"In this case certain organs or portions of organs were sent you for analysis and you reported thereon?"

"That is so."

"When you made your analysis and report you were not informed whose body you were examining?"

"I was not. I did not know till much later that it had to do with Sir Nicholas Brannock."

"Quite so. Your report fully confirmed the opinion of Sir Evan Leadenhall that the organs in question contained the poison known as oil of mirbane, or nitro-benzol, in fatal quantities?"

"That is so."

"Now, Dr. Wilberforce, by a strange—I may perhaps say a painful—coincidence, Sir Nicholas's nephew is a friend of yours?"

"He is."

"Your friend asserts that he called on you on the evening of Saturday."

"May I point out, Sir, that I am here as an expert witness and have nothing to do with any other part of the case?"

" You are here, Dr. Wilberforce," said the Coroner severely, " you are here in the interests of justice. You will please answer the questions I put to you."

Wilberforce knew this was right. He could only bow rather stiffly.

" Now," resumed the Coroner, " Sir Rollo says you offered him a theatre ticket for this Saturday evening. Is that true ? "

" Absolutely."

" He says he called at a little before ten to tell you he could not use it. The ticket would not be much use at ten o'clock ? "

" One sometimes goes in late to Revues."

" You were out ? "

" I was."

" When you returned were you told Mr. Brannock had called and had waited some time for you ? "

" I was."

" Where did he wait ? "

" As I was out, I do not see——"

" Really, Dr. Wilberforce, is it of any use your fencing like this ? Of course I can get it from your servant, but Sir Rollo himself has said he waited in your laboratory."

Wilberforce bowed again. He was looking very unhappy.

" Have you any poisons in your laboratory ? "

" I have."

" Is there nitro-benzol among them ? "

" There is."

" Can you say just where it is and how it is identified ? "

" I have a cabinet at one side of the room full of toxic drugs and specimens. Each is labelled."

"Anyone waiting in your room could have access to that cabinet?"

"No, not as a rule." The doctor was getting more distressed.

"Why not?"

"It is kept locked."

"Was it locked on this evening?"

"Yes."

"Had you the key with you?"

"No. The key—was in the lock."

"Now, Dr. Wilberforce, this will not do. The cabinet may or may not have been locked. In effect it was unlocked, as the key was there. Please be candid."

"You are trying to make me incriminate a friend who would no more commit a murder than you or I would!"

"Really, Doctor, I am surprised at this outburst. You can stand down. You have told me what I wanted to know."

"One moment, please." Querit had jumped up. Here at any rate was a friendly witness.

"You say you generally carried the key of your cabinet. How do you know you were not carrying it on this occasion?"

"When I returned home I could not admit myself as I had gone out without my keys. My man let me in and told me of Mr. Brannock's visit."

"Where were the keys?"

"In the cabinet. I remembered leaving them there."

This did not help matters and the unhappy doctor fully realised it. Querit made another attempt with rather better results.

" You heard my question to Sir Evan Leadenhall as to the time that might elapse between the taking of a quantity of nitro-benzol and its fatal result. What is the longest interval you think reasonable or possible in the circumstances ? "

" It is difficult to say : some hours—it depends on many conditions."

" Would four hours be possible ? "

" I think so."

" Thank you. Just one thing more, please. When you returned and found your keys in your cabinet had you any reason to think anyone had been to that cabinet ? "

" None whatever."

" Thank you, that is all," and Querit sat down.

" One moment, Dr. Wilberforce," said the Coroner. " You tell us you have nitro-benzol in your cabinet. In what vessel is it contained ? "

" A stoppered bottle."

" Could you tell if a minute quantity like fifteen drops had been extracted ? "

" Not unless I was specially measuring it."

" Did you specially measure it ? "

" No."

A few more witnesses were called, including some from the restaurant to prove the nature of the food supplied, and then the Coroner summed up to his jury. It was easy to see he had come to a conclusion in the matter and perhaps his slight differences with Dr. Wilberforce had not improved his temper.

" You may have wondered," he said to the jury, " why I kept the expert evidence as to the cause of death till the last. I did so as I wished the earlier

witnesses to give their stories freely and without any bias or fear that might have existed had they known exactly what was to follow. You may also be shocked, and rightly shocked, that a man so widely respected as Sir Nicholas Brannock should be concerned in a liason of this character. Please dismiss that from your minds. Except so far as it explains the actions of other people it has nothing to do with this case.

" Now two eminent scientists, having made careful and independent examination, have declared that Sir Nicholas Brannock died from poisoning, and that nitro-benzol was the poison. One of these scientists may be described as a reluctant witness, but he agrees with these findings and I think you will accept them as facts. If your duty was only to record the cause of death, that duty would be readily done. Unfortunately your duty goes further. It is for you to say whether the evidence leads you to believe that the fatal dose of poison was administered deliberately and with evil intent by any person or persons. If you believe that, and you are satisfied beyond reasonable doubt who that person was, you must find that person guilty—doing your duty justly, fearlessly and regardless of personalities or consequences. There has been no suggestion of suicide, nor does it seem reasonable in the circumstances."

He then ran through the evidence, piecing the story together for them. Then he concluded——

" Death from poisoning is in some respects different from death affected in other ways. If a man is killed by a blow, that blow may have been struck in self-defence ; it may be an accident, or it may have been meant to hurt but not to kill. It may have been

struck in hot blood with little malicious intent. These things cannot apply to a death by poisoning. It is the most cruel, the most cunning, the most calculated crime. It cannot be done in self-defence, it cannot be accidental. It is wilful murder.

" This being so, it being a calculated crime, there are three things you have to look for. The first is motive. The second is means, and the third is opportunity. In the remarkable story you have heard was there anyone who had a motive for removing Sir Nicholas Brannock? There was one man. The man who had quarrelled with him over a woman—the primitive cause for much hatred—a man who was deeply in debt, but who would be affluent on the death of Sir Nicholas. Not one motive, but two—the two strongest motives possible, jealousy and money.

" Had this individual the means of committing this foul crime? You may remember in most poison cases the question of discovering how suspected persons have obtained the fatal drug is a vital one. Ordinary persons do not require poisons. The act of obtaining them is in itself suspicious. Sometimes you cannot prove that act, but you can prove the suspected person had access to the poison. In this case you find that Rollo Brannock, for it is no use concealing names, Rollo Brannock, the man with the powerful motives, went straight to the one place in London where he could obtain poison of almost any known kind. Possibly when he called on his friend, Dr. Wilberforce, no such thought was in his mind, but he waited there, and there at his hand was the open cabinet, and in it was that poison—the poison that killed his uncle.

" So much for the means. What of the opportunity?

It followed immediately. As we know, Sir Nicholas called on his nephew and they supped together. To make matters even easier, there was that suppressed incident when Sir Nicholas left the table, and left his food and drink at the mercy of his companion.

"You must draw your own conclusions, honestly and fearlessly, from these facts. We are told that probably death would result in two and a half hours from the taking of the poison. That brings us to the exact moment when it is shown, both by the evidence of the waiter and of the butler in Cadogan Square that the telephone was being used. It is suggested by Rollo Brannock's friend that death might not take place for as long as four hours. If that presents a real doubt, you must say so. There is also some conflict of evidence as to whether Sir Nicholas stated he would see his nephew, later. Miss Gayton says he did. Sir Rollo says he did not. Which will you believe? Miss Gayton's statement is supported by the unquestioned fact that Sir Nicholas acted as she says he proposed to act—he went forthwith to see his nephew. To see his nephew, who had in the meantime visited that room where he knew poisons were kept. You must give Sir Rollo the benefit of every reasonable doubt, but remember *someone* poisoned Sir Nicholas Brannock. Was there anyone else who had the motive, who had access to the poison used, and who had the opportunity to administer it? Gentlemen, consider your verdict!"

There was a solemn hush in the Court as the jury filed out. When they had gone there was an excited whisper of muttered conversation. Rollo sat silent, and his friends did not know what to say to him.

Querit turned round and made some remark, but the young man offered no reply. All he said was one tense sentence to Bruce Graham——

" It is horrible ! "

The minutes passed, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes. Then the jury returned. The Coroner also re-entered the Court, and the foreman of the jury was asked if they were agreed on their verdict. He nodded in affirmation and said :

" We find that Sir Nicholas Brannock died from poisoning and we bring a verdict against Sir Rollo Brannock of wilful murder ! "

CHAPTER IX

FAMILY COUNCILS

PROBABLY no one in that crowded court could have given a very clear account of all that happened after the jury declared their verdict. Rollo Brannock leapt to his feet and protested he was innocent. Two policemen stepped to his side. Bruce Graham jumped up and put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and whispered it was a ghastly mistake and would be put right. People at the back of the court stood to see what was happening. There was a girl's half-stifled cry. The Coroner said he would issue a warrant for Sir Rollo Brannock's arrest. Querit was on his feet to make some application. All these things seemed to happen simultaneously or within a few moments. Then Rollo was led into an ante-room by the police. Querit followed. People filed out and stood in excited groups in the corridor and in the courtyard discussing the sensation.

Bruce Graham had had a hurried word with Querit, and was speaking to Rollo's two brothers-in-law when he caught sight of Joan Wedderburn standing in the press near the door. He scrambled across to her.

"I did not know you were here," he said, as he reached her.

"I had to come. Bruce, it is damnable. What is to be done?"

"I am arranging a family council at my rooms to-night. Querit will be there and the Tempests and the Bennikins. We will soon make things right."

"But that awful man, Bruce. He put things so that jury *had* to say what he wanted. Anyone who just looked at Rollo should see it is absurd."

"Don't be too distressed, Joan. These Coroners' Courts and their verdicts are rather a farce really. They only mean that things look suspicious. The real trial is quite another matter, and I expect everything will be cleared up long before that."

"Will you come round to-night, Bruce, and tell me what the family is going to do?"

He promised he would, and then he had to leave her to go back to his own party. As they were quitting the court, he happened to see Inspector Porter and he ran across to him.

"Porter," he said, "you are making a terrible mistake."

"I should be glad to think so," said the Inspector gravely. "I have been into the matter more carefully than you may imagine. I did not want to come to that conclusion but it was inevitable."

"And yet I stake my soul it is wrong."

"Well, Sir, I am sorry for you and for all his friends. If you get any new light on the matter let me know. I will be only too glad to follow it up."

Both Major Bennikin aand George Tempest lived outside London. After the funeral they had gone with their wives to stay at the big house in Cadogan Square until the inquest was concluded. No doubt

their presence was comforting to their bereaved Aunt. Bruce Graham, however, felt it would be better not to hold the family council at the house of the murdered man. As Rollo's best friend, he had asked them to meet at his rooms to discuss what should be done to prove that young man's innocence and secure his speedy release.

Mr. Querit was a little late in keeping the evening appointment, so Bruce had the relations alone for a time. Rollo's two sisters, Dorothy and Daphne, were good-looking girls, considerably alike in appearance but decidedly different in character. Dorothy had a will of her own and her husband, George Tempest, generally bowed to it. Daphne was completely overshadowed by her husband, Ernest Bennikin. He was a big man and would have been good-looking if his eyes had not been so small and so close together. He had left the army as soon as he could and was one of those futile persons who devote their entire lives to playing lawn tennis. He played well enough to reach, or almost to reach, a demi-semi-final round in a good tournament. He spent his summer being beaten from end to end of the South Coast of England, and his winter in being beaten from end to end of the South Coast of France. Daphne was dragged about with him, but seemed to enjoy it. They had no children. The Tempests had two, twins, named after their mother and their uncle, and generally called Rolly and Dolly.

When the trouble arose about old Christopher's estate it was Ernest Bennikin who had insisted that the will was the will, and whose niggardliness had been mainly responsible for Rollo's refusal to take

a share. Dorothy had always felt ashamed of the arrangement, and had often tried to re-open the matter, but the other three were pleased with things as they stood.

"It's a bit thick, you know," said George Tempest in his slow way. "When I went to that inquest I asked Rollo what the use of such things was. I said they might let us get on with the funeral without fuss. He never said a word about what had happened. I knew nothin' about the quarrel and the supper and all the rest of it until to-day when he went into the box."

"No doubt he hoped to the last it would not come out," said Bennikin, with an unpleasant laugh.

"What do you mean, Ernest? You do not suggest that Rollo is guilty?" Dorothy asked the question in a shocked, amazed tone.

"My dear girl, I suggest nothing; but you must look facts in the face. I hope he can prove his innocence, but I was in court, and the story seems to fit together without a flaw. What do you say, George?"

Now George Tempest was a gentleman, but even gentlemen are subject to temptation—or, as he would himself have put it, "you can't help thinkin'." And the thought had been in his mind that if Rollo had murdered Uncle Nicholas, and if Rollo paid the penalty of his crime, someone else would have the vast Brannock estates; and if someone else, who but the elder sister and her two children? He had not inquired into the legal aspects of the matter. He fought against thinking about it at all. It was an ugly little devil of a thought and it would not begone. But George Tempest was a gentleman.

" Of course Rollo is innocent," he said, slowly but firmly. " It is up to us to clear him and to clear the name."

" I agree we've got to clear the name," said Bennikin, " but I wish I saw how it was to be done."

" Here is Querit," remarked Bruce, " now we can start."

The lawyer came in and explained his lateness by saying he had had an interview with Sir Rollo and had tentatively engaged Sir James Egan, K.C. for the defence. Sir James, as he reminded them, had defended in a large number of notable cases and was undoubtedly the very best man they could get.

" The costs, of course, come out of the estate ? " asked Bennikin.

" Yes ; that is, Sir Rollo pays them and the estates are now his."

" Can you tell us, Mr. Querit," asked Dorothy, " exactly what has to happen ? This morning we were expecting nothing of this kind. Of course, it is all a ghastly mistake. I haven't dared to tell Lady Brannock yet. What is the legal procedure to get things put right ? "

" To-morrow, or the next day," said the lawyer, " Sir Rollo will be charged at a police court. The evidence will be gone through and we shall reserve our defence. It is a formal proceeding and he will be committed for trial at the Old Bailey. That trial will probably come on in four or five weeks. So that is the time we have to work up the defence."

" But must Rollo stay in prison all that time ? " asked his sister. " Do they not let him out on bail ? "

" Not on a capital charge, I fear. Of course, his

surroundings are fairly comfortable and he is allowed to see a few people on certain conditions."

"Meanwhile," said Bruce, "everything possible must be done to establish his innocence and catch the guilty party. How are we to set about it?"

"Well," replied Querit, "feeling that some necessity might arise, I instructed a private detective, a man I know well and have every confidence in, Grice Chester. I instructed him to attend the court to-day to hear the evidence and watch the parties, and to hold himself in readiness to come here to-night in case you decided to employ him. If you approve, I can telephone and he will be round in five minutes."

This was agreed and their deliberations were suspended while this man hurried to them. Bruce found himself wondering what sort of a man he would be. In fiction the private detective is generally a brainy hero of almost superhuman attainments, whose brilliance is in striking contrast to the pig-headed stupidity of the police. In real life he is only too often a sneaking spy who is willing to imagine what he is paid to see. He hoped Grice Chester would be of the former type and would find the way out of their troubles.

His first impression when the newcomer entered was not altogether unfavourable. Grice Chester was a tall, thin, clean-shaven man, and it was easy to see he tried to model himself on the Sherlock Holmes lines as far as he could. He also cultivated an American accent, no doubt with the idea of giving an impression of cuteness. He, however, looked straightforward and intelligent.

Querit introduced him to the company, and inquired

if there were any special features in the case he thought should be investigated.

"Sure," he replied, "many features. The first is this. Sir Nicholas was poisoned, and the poison was taken into the stomach with food. Those are facts, and they narrow the case down to the food he took and the people he met that night. Sir Nicholas had two meals, dinner and supper. Now Mr. Querit showed by his able questions that the fatal dose might have been taken four hours previously, that would be about nine o'clock, or before he left Miss Gayton's flat. If it might be four and a half hours he would be still at dinner. So he might have got his poison at dinner, or in a drink before he left the flat."

"But you will have to show that Miss Gayton had a motive for poisoning him and had the poison to do it with," said Bennikin.

"True. The motive presents no trouble. Quite the reverse. Miss Gayton was engaged to the nephew, who was the heir. If she removed the uncle, who might be the obstacle to her marriage, the way was left clear for her, and she became Lady Brannock, the wife of a wealthy man."

There was silence for some moments. This seemed a plausible story and would fit in with the medical evidence.

"Can you prove it?" whispered Daphne.

"Well, Madam, it is a thing we can try to prove. At present it is only a suggestion. But remember, if we cannot prove who did the murder, we may establish doubts as to Sir Rollo having done it, and doubts lead to acquittals, or at least to juries disagreeing."

"But we want to prove Rollo innocent," said Dorothy.

"You must not ask too much," said Bennikin. "Chester is only putting forward a theory. If he can show Miss Gayton procured the poison, that will be another matter."

"Quite so," said the detective. "I am only indicating my first line of inquiry. Of course, you must get more medical evidence to show that four or more hours might elapse between the taking of that particular poison and its fatal result. Dr. Wilberforce would not be of much use."

"He was doing his best for his friend," said Bruce.

"A very bad best. His hesitations and evasions did a lot of harm. It looked as though he was trying to conceal things."

"I do not doubt we can get the expert evidence we want," said Querit. "Even Leadenhall admitted four hours was not impossible."

"And if we cannot show that Miss Gayton had any poison, what then?" asked Bruce.

Querit shrugged his shoulders.

"We are not out to hang Lilla Gayton," he said. "If we show she had two of the three requisites laid down by the Coroner, the motive and the opportunity, we should be able to confuse issues and raise real doubts. Sir James Egan is a wonderful man. I think you can leave things to him and to Grice Chester and myself."

"I am not leaving things to anybody," said Bruce. "You do your best, and good luck to you, but I shall look around too. We must all work together. I am not out to get Rollo off, but to clear his name. I take

it the family authorises me to look after matters? Of course, you will be going home? "

The last remarks were made to the two sisters and their husbands. They all nodded in agreement.

The council broke up soon after. Dorothy and Daphne begged Bruce to let them know how matters proceeded and if they could be of any assistance. It was only Ernest Bennikin who struck the jarring note.

" It is a pity Rollo was so hard up," he said with his nasty smile, " and it is a pity he called on Wilberforce that same night ! "

CHAPTER X

THE ODD HALF-HOUR

WHILE the family council was being held in Bruce Graham's rooms, the Wedderburns were giving a small dinner party in their house in Hans Place. It was hardly a party, but their neighbours, General and Mrs. Raeton, with their daughter, Grace, had come to join them at their evening meal.

It was inevitable that the conversation should turn on the remarkable events that had happened earlier in the day, when their friend, Rollo Brannock, was arrested for the murder of his uncle. Yet it was difficult to discuss the matter before Joan, who but a month ago had been betrothed to the alleged murderer, and who now sat pale and silent, her big grey eyes black with misery. Hardly a morsel of food passed her lips.

"I am so thankful, my dear," whispered Mrs. Raeton, who was a kindly, well-meaning woman. "I am so thankful you broke it all off a month ago."

"I am not," said Joan.

"Not? Oh, my dear, it is much, much better. The papers will be full of it, portraits of everybody

concerned and all the details they can get together. Luckily they will not know about that."

"I would not mind. I would like to stand by him when everyone is against him."

"We are not against him. We all believe Rollo is innocent," burst in General Raeton. "The question is who is guilty? There's a chance for your Gabriel Jowlett, my dear. These psychic people would prove their claims if they could come forward when they are wanted and clear up a mystery of that sort."

"They cannot work miracles where there is want of faith," returned his wife.

"Certainly there is biblical ground for that," remarked Mr. Wedderburn, "but want of faith is universal. It is want of faith in the first place that makes these Gabriel Jowlett's possible. All new religions are the result of want of faith. We have no faith, yet we set up new idols. In the past men worshipped Baal, now they worship Ball—big ball or little ball, golf ball, cricket ball, football, it matters not. Mankind has gone mad on the worship of sport."

"Oh, Mr. Wedderburn," said Grace Raeton, "the flannelled fool and muddied oaf business was washed out in the war. Sport is necessary to keep us fit."

Grace was a good-natured girl. She was not quite sure if Mr. Wedderburn had rambled on to his pet theme deliberately to help Joan and take the conversation away from the unhappy subject of Rollo, or whether he had done so simply because he could not help it. Anyway, she would assist in the good work.

"Ah, my dear young lady, Kipling saw the danger from a patriotic point of view in the worship of sport, but I am not sure that even he realised the peril from

the spiritual point of view. Golf is the father of anarchy. Well-to-do men neglected their religion to play golf. The moment they gave up church-going the lower classes said, 'why should we go?' In abandoning religion men cast away the cement that holds society together."

"No, no, Wedderburn," said Raeton, with his usual chuckle, "golf is not the father of anarchy, but the second cousin of Mrs. Grundy. It keeps middle-aged men from getting into mischief. They may talk about naughty things but they no longer have the time or inclination to do them. Believe me, more golf means better morals!"

Joan was not listening to this discussion on sport. She turned to Mrs. Raeton, who was beside her, and said very softly:

"Do you really think Mr. Jowlett could tell who killed Sir Nicholas?"

"Yes, my dear, I do. He is a wonderful man and his powers have never been fully tested; but nothing can be revealed to people who only regard manifestations as conjuring performances. Admit for a moment that it is possible to get into touch with the spirit world and you will see the irreverence, the insult to the departed, of those who only inquire for amusement or in the hope of exposing a trick."

Joan lapsed into silence and heard nothing of her father's familiar deep-voiced denunciations.

"They tell me that at Wimbledon a huge and hideous temple of sport has been erected and the worshippers go there from all quarters of the globe for two weeks in every year. All the rest of the time this edifice is empty, a mighty monument to human folly."

" Naughty little Lenglen, "murmured Grace." What a lot she has to answer for ! "

Then Auntie Angela, who had said very little during the meal, whispered to Mrs. Raeton, and the ladies rose. Joan and Grace went to the den where they often spent their time together, but Joan said :

" Do you mind if I stay here alone, Grace ? I don't want to be a moody beast, but somehow I must think things out. I am expecting Bruce, and something has got to be done about Rollo."

" You still care for him, Joan ? "

" I don't know. I only know the whole thing hurts awfully and we've got to do our darnedest to put it right."

" Cannot I help ? "

" Not yet. I'll let you know if you can."

Grace obediently left her and joined the others in the drawing-room. Everyone forgave the disappearance of her young friend, and indeed they felt they could talk more freely in her absence.

Joan had arranged that Bruce should be brought straight to her room when he arrived, and when he did she cried eagerly :

" Tell me, what are they doing ? "

" They have engaged James Egan for the defence. He is the best K.C. there is in this line, and they have employed Grice Chester, a private detective, to look into matters.

" What is he going to do ? "

" His first job is to tackle Lilla Gayton."

" Lilla Gayton," said Joan slowly, shaking her head. " I don't think she did it."

"I do not know that anyone thinks she did," replied Bruce.

"Then why is he tackling her?"

"His idea seems to be to show that she might have done it. The more people who might have done it, the less certainty about anyone."

"But—you don't mean that they think Rollo really did do it?"

"Well, my dear, to be perfectly honest with you, I believe that is what they do think. Their aim seems to be to make a case to confuse the jury rather than to clear Rollo."

"How damnable of them. Then it is left to us. What are we going to do, Bruce? I feel it's up to me. If I had never broken with him it might never have happened."

"I owe him something, too."

"How is that?"

"Well, you know, there was a disturbance in Europe some time back. Of course, you wouldn't remember it——"

"Of course not! I was at school, and you gorging on bully beef in your cosy dug-outs never realised our puddingless deprivations so cheerily borne! What has that to do with it?"

"Yes, they were jolly times, weren't they? It's a queer thing, a year or two hence the kiddies will still learn all about Julius Cæsar, and Hengist and Horsa, and William the Conqueror, and the king who died from eating potted lampreys, but they will never hear of Hindenburg and Tirpitz and Foch and Haig—the fellows who made the world what it is to-day."

"But, Bruce, why are you talking like this?"

"You are a bit overstrung, old girl, and we have got to keep cool. But I was going to tell you about Rollo. Out there, in the early days when we were bolting according to plan, I got left behind in a village. I had stopped a bit of shell and was forgotten. Old Rollo came back and whisked me off from just under the Germans' noses. So I owe him something."

"He never told me."

"He wouldn't. Perhaps I ought to have done, but those things happened, you know. We remember them if we don't talk about them. Now, we've got to take this thing calmly, looking the facts in the face, as that beast Bennikin said. What is our plan of campaign?"

"I'll be calm enough—unless I meet any of his people and they dare to doubt his innocence. If Major Bennikin tries his cynicisms on me he'll shrivel like a cabbage in a hell blast. That sort of thing almost makes me use strong language."

"Good. I wish you could give Daphne a few lessons. However, where are we to start?"

"There is just one thing, Bruce. Did you notice carefully what Inspector Porter called the time-table for the evening?"

"Not very."

"Well, I did, and it seems to me to leave a good deal of time unaccounted for. I made a note of it."

"Have you got your note? Let us go through it."

"Here it is. Old Nick left home at seven. I must call him that; he's a bad egg. He got here at five past and at his Club at seven-thirty. That's all right, though it's not quick going. From 7.45 to 9.15 he was at Miss Gayton's flat. Then at ten o'clock he

was at Rollo's chambers. That's what sets me guessing, Bruce. Why did it take three-quarters-of-an-hour to get from Victoria Street to Ryder Street ? "

" It's slow work certainly. That end of Victoria Street is about three minutes from St. James's Park—yes, I don't see how it is going to take more than twenty minutes from door to door."

" That is if you walk. It's about five minutes in a taxi. But anyway it leaves nearly half-an-hour to account for. And that's not all. The worthy Henry Waller, whose wife had the crystal wireless set, and no doubt darns his socks to military music, says he picked up Sir Nicholas just before ten at Piccadilly Circus and drove him to Rollo's rooms. So you see he was either wandering around for forty minutes and then found himself in Piccadilly Circus, or else he spent half-an-hour somewhere else after leaving that woman and before calling on Rollo."

" By Jove, Joan, you are knocking spots off Grice Chester ! That does give something to think about."

" I expect Grice Chester will be on it when he goes into the thing carefully. But every few minutes are important."

" Yes ; but it's poison, you know. If it wasn't supper and it wasn't dinner, how will you account for it ? The old boy can't have had three meals in the evening."

" Most men can manage a drink at half time. Where did he have that drink and who gave it him ? "

" We must certainly find out. It is rather odd that in all the information given so wide a gap should be left."

" Not odd if the person he called on was guilty. That is what made me so angry with that horrible

Coroner. I don't know much about criminals, but it seems to me the more obvious the proof the more likely the person is innocent."

"I am afraid the law does not work on that basis, but as Querit says, your half-hour will give people something more to think about."

"That's not enough," said Joan. "I don't want Rollo to have the benefit of the doubt. There must be no doubt."

"I'm with you. The first thing is to find friend Waller and discover more exactly where Sir Nicholas was, and then to see the porter in Victoria Street and ask if he left on foot. If he had a taxi we must advertise or get Inspector Porter to inquire. Joan, I'll back you any day against Grice Chester, Porter, and all the rest of them! The whole thing may turn on what happened in that odd half-hour."

CHAPTER XI

LADY BRANNOCK

AS Mr. Querit had explained, the next steps in the Brannock case were of a formal character. Sir Rollo was charged at a police-court with the murder of his uncle, and was committed for trial. The evidence of the principal witnesses was repeated, but there was no cross-examination and the defence was reserved. Consequently there were no new sensations even in the pages of the *Daily Picture*. That journal, however, described the appearance of the prisoner, and the clothes he was wearing, and managed to get snapshots of him as he entered and quitted the Court. It also filled columns with what it could discover of the story of his boyhood and his upbringing.

Needless to say, the proceedings at the inquest were reported in the fullest detail, and the *Daily Picture* took much credit to itself as being the first journal to realise the dramatic story that lay behind the Sloane Square Mystery. There is a wise law that forbids newspaper comment on a case that is *sub-judice* lest the prisoner's chances should be prejudiced, or possible jurors unknowingly have their judgment influenced beforehand. There are, however, many things that can be said and done without quite infringing this law,

and the *Daily Picture* and other journals like it went as far as they dared in the matter. They tried to interview most of the parties concerned and some of them suggested there was still a good deal more to be revealed.

No law prevents the public discussing a case in all its details, and this was a case that lent itself to much difference of opinion. Many poison mysteries have occasioned comment, but when the victim is a well-known baronet and the accused is his nephew and heir, there is some excuse for popular excitement. The majority of people accepted the line of proof adopted by the Coroner and did not question the young man's guilt, but not a few took the contrary view. Many, especially women, were sorry for Sir Rollo and declared that Miss Gayton knew more than she had told. In fact, the public was divided into those who believed that the dinner was the fatal meal and those who blamed the supper. "He did it," said most. "She did it," said many, but a cautious few shook their heads and declined to decide between them until more evidence was given.

Crowds came every day to Sloane Square to see the place where the body was found, and enterprising gutter merchants did quite a good trade in the sale of souvenirs in the shape of photographs of the fountain and the cross.

Comment was not all foolish or ill-informed. In the first-class railway carriages that took prosperous solicitors back to their homes in Richmond, Purley, and other highly respectable suburbs, the matter was discussed as freely as at the street corners.

"I do not say the Coroner was mistaken," would be

a typical comment, " but I do say his summing up was disgraceful. He spoke like a prosecuting attorney. I must try and hear the case when it comes on."

Meanwhile Rollo's friends were taking every step they could to secure new evidence. They knew they had all too little time in which to work, and at first their labours and searches seemed entirely unproductive. Bruce Graham got from Inspector Porter the address of Waller, the taxi-man. He called on him, but gleaned little fresh information.

" Yes, I remember the occasion perfectly," said Waller. " I had just put a fare down at the Trocadero and was passing the London Pavilion when the gentleman stopped me. That's all I can tell you."

It was not much, but it showed Sir Nicholas was on the side of Piccadilly Circus furthest from Victoria Street, and therefore supported Joan's view that he might have paid some other call and had not merely walked slowly between the two flats.

An interview with the porter at 357 Victoria Street, was even less illuminating.

" I remember Sir Nicholas coming," said the man. " Of course I know him quite well, as he often came ; but I did not see him go. It's a first floor flat and people mostly walk out without using the lift ; so if I am not in the hall at the time I don't see them."

On the day following Rollo's committal, Angela Marsden told Joan she proposed to call on Lady Brannock, and she invited her to go with her. After a moment's hesitation, Joan agreed.

Marsh, the butler, recognised them directly he opened the door, and he said he thought that her ladyship might be glad to see them. In reply to an

inquiry from Joan, who knew him very well, he said Mr. and Mrs. Tempest and Major and Mrs. Bennikin had left that morning.

The house in Cadogan Square was beautifully furnished, and after being taken up the square staircase and shown into the large front drawing-room, the visitors were ushered along a passage into a smaller room at the back, where Lady Brannock lay on a wide couch.

"Ah, Angela," she said in a low, sweet voice, "it is very good of you to come to see me. And you, too, Joan. How are you, my dear?"

"I have wanted to come, Catherine," said Auntie Angela. "We have been so sorry for you all this terrible time. Are you feeling really better?"

"I think I am," said her old friend, "but Dr. Sarbleton is not so sure about it. He says I must not go out, and he did not want me to see anyone. But that was asking too much."

There was a pause. It is always difficult to express sympathy after bereavement without using stiff and stilted phrases. When that bereavement has been accompanied by the revelation of the lost one's infidelity the difficulty is certainly greater.

"I heard you might be going away soon," said Auntie Angela presently. "I think that would be very wise. Have you made any plans?"

"Dorothy wants me to stay with her and the children for a time. Perhaps I may do so. She had to go back to them. Daphne wished to stay here with me, but that meant having Ernest, too, and I doubt if I shall ever be strong enough for that!"

There was a slight smile in her tired eyes as she said this, and as they rested on Joan, she added :

" Are you still fond of Rollo ? "

" I think I am," faltered the girl.

" Let him know it. He will deserve something good when he is free."

" Oh, Lady Brannock, you do believe in him ? "

" Of course I do, my dear. I know Rollo. He is not that sort at all."

" He is not," said the girl eagerly. " How I wish we could prove it ! You cannot suggest anything—or ought I not to ask you ? "

" Why not ? Should I wish an innocent man to suffer ? The truth is bound to come out."

" I wish I knew what we could do," said the girl again. " The Coroner made it all so black and hopeless. We want to know what happened to Sir Nicholas between half-past nine and ten."

" What do you mean ? " asked Lady Brannock, and Joan explained the gap in the time-table as discovered by Bruce and herself.

" If Sir Nicholas was in Shaftesbury Avenue we think he must have called somewhere else," she added.

" Was it in Shaftesbury Avenue ? " inquired Lady Brannock. " I thought they said Piccadilly Circus."

" It is the same thing," said the girl. " The end of Shaftesbury Avenue is in Piccadilly Circus. Could he have called on anyone in Shaftesbury Avenue ? "

" I cannot say." Lady Brannock put her handkerchief to her eyes, and kind-hearted Auntie Angela knew they ought not to add to her distress. She got up and said they must be going. She realised that the doctor would not approve of a long stay. When

they rose, Lady Brannock beckoned Joan back to her and whispered :

" Let him know, my dear, let him know—and be good to him. He told me all about his mistakes when he came here to tea. But you can trust him. I am sure things will soon come right."

Joan kissed her and left the house more cheered than she had felt for some days. Outside she said to her aunt :

" I've got to pay a call by myself now, so I must run away," and before Auntie Angela could ask any questions she was gone.

CHAPTER XII

IN PONT STREET

OLD MR. WEDDERBURN often declared he was glad he lived on the west of Sloane Street and not on the east. On the west is a wide area of what estate agents call "modern red brick," but on the east are the stuccoed terraces of Belgravia. Fond of statistics, Mr. Wedderburn sometimes said the cost of trying to keep a London house white totalled almost as much as the house was worth. That is no doubt an exaggeration, but if it cost on average fifty pounds every third year to paint the outside of a house, the annual bill for white paint in a good class square of a hundred houses would be a pretty considerable sum. Add together all the squares and all the streets in which the houses struggle for external purity, and the magnitude of the yearly bill must be appalling. The streets of London could be paved with gold if its houses need not try to be white. It is, however, only fair to many Belgravian residents to say that they show no bigotted regularity in painting as often as their leases say they should.

Pont Street, to most people who know of it, is a broad highway lined on each side with red brick palaces fit to house noble earls, stately ambassadors, and portly

stockbrokers. Those who know it better are aware that it crosses Sloane Street and at the Belgravian end degenerates into commerce. There are here the business premises of chemists, builders and estate agents, who, doubtless, amass mighty incomes in serving their aristocratic neighbours. There is a butcher's shop, and even a public-house. Over some of these premises are residential suites, and one of these suites had the honour of accommodating the much discussed missioner, Mr. Gabriel Jowlett.

A private door beside a shop gave access to the quarters he occupied. A solemn-looking manservant was on duty near the door, and another manservant, rather more solemn than the first, was on duty in an ante-room at the top of the stairs. It was thus impossible for anyone to rush in and disturb Gabriel Jowlett before he was ready to receive them.

This, perhaps, was fortunate, for although Gabriel had a remarkable appearance, he had habits that are quite ordinary. No one, be he poet or philosopher, propagandist or patriot, can live all day and every day in the ecstatic atmosphere his admirers picture—the halo must be laid aside at times.

On this afternoon, Gabriel was in his small back room. His massive head, with its dark hair turning grey at the temples, was bent over papers on which he was writing words of comfort and counsel to members of his flock. He wore a flannel shirt, without collar, waistcoat or coat, and the top button of his trousers was unfastened to give greater ease and ensure the flow of higher thought. In his mouth was a large briar pipe, and at his side two large bottles of stout, one nearly empty. His glass was also empty.

Presently there was a tap at his door. The more solemn manservant put his head in and said :

" The young lady who telephoned, sir."

Gabriel nodded and the door was closed. He jumped quickly up and smoothed back his hair with a comb. Then very deftly, almost imperceptibly, he darkened the shadows beneath his deep-set brown eyes. He took from a cupboard a long, black robe that buttoned round his throat and fell to his feet. He left his room and entered the larger room in front.

This was a room papered and curtained entirely in black. There was a small, dark oak table, and a few upright chairs, covered in black, stood near it. The ceiling was hung with a drooping black cloth that was pinned up in the centre and at four places near the corners by electric lights. The centre light was bright, enclosed by a golden-yellow bowl. The four side lights were dim, and of a sapphire blue.

There were no queer shapes or cabalistic designs on the walls, but a few texts or mottoes in silver lettering seemed carved into the blackness. " Fear fear, and only fear." " Know thyself and rejoice in the knowledge." " Truth Lives, Love Lives, All Else Dies." These were among the maxims that shone out clearly in their dark surroundings.

" You wish to see me ? " The words were slowly spoken in a deep voice. The man had closed the door, and in the long, black robe, with its wide sleeves hiding his hands, he appeared almost invisible, except for his large, white face, with its sombre, mysterious eyes.

" I do," said the girl, nervously, more than half wishing she had not come.

" Why ? "

"I am told you can tell the secrets of the dead." The words were only just audible.

"Do you believe that?"

"I—I will try to believe it."

"I will try to help you."

There was a pause, and he moved silently towards the little table.

"You pay me nothing for what I may tell you," he said in the same slow, deep voice. "Doctors may charge for killing their patients. Lawyers may charge for bad advice and for litigation that is loss to one of the parties, if not both. But the truth must be free. You are, however, at liberty to buy my book. The price is two guineas."

She could see his vague outline more clearly now as it stood under the centre light, and he held towards her a slim volume that had its title in white lettering, "Mind Mastered Man."

Without hesitation the girl took from her purse the sum suggested. He placed it somewhere out of sight and handed her the little book. Then he said:

"What is your name?"

"Does that matter?"

"It is best."

"But people give false names."

"They do. They start a search for truth with a deliberate lie. They open a sèance with suspicion. And they are surprised that there is an atmosphere antagonistic to revelation!"

"My name is Joan Wedderburn."

"Joan Wedderburn, what do you ask of me?"

"I want to know who killed Sir Nicholas Brannock."

"And what is it to you who killed Sir Nicholas Brannock?"

"Sir Rollo is—a friend of mine."

"His nephew, accused of his murder, is a friend of yours, and you desire to know whether or not he is guilty?"

"I know he is not guilty. I desire to know who is."

"Are you more than a friend to Sir Rollo?" The sombre eyes seemed as though they would burn into her heart.

"No—I was engaged to him."

"You love him still. Have you anything that belonged to him?"

"I returned his gifts. I have this." She handed him a silver fourpenny piece, a valueless gift, given in jest in the days before they were betrothed.

"I did not mean that. I meant have you anything that belonged to the man who was murdered, Sir Nicholas Brannock?"

"No, but I have brought a book he handed me a few hours before he died."

"All you have told me is true?" asked Gabriel Jowlett, as he took the volume.

"It is."

Then the large centre light went out. How, she could not tell. He was still by her side.

"Sit here," he said, and they sat on opposite sides of the table. He placed the book in the centre and on it he put a large crystal globe, which, in the dim light from the sapphire lamps, looked gloomy and opaque to her.

"Put your hands in mine." His voice was deeper

and seemed further away. She put out her hands and they found his; and thus, with extended arms, one each side of the crystal ball, they sat at the table. She felt her hands in his firm, cold grip, and there was a silence. . . . She did not feel afraid. She was trying to believe, to believe it was possible a message might come to them from the far beyond.

She could see his white face bending nearer the crystal. The moments passed. His grip tightened, but he said nothing. Then, when he spoke, his voice had a softer, dream-like sound.

"The shadows gather. The moon is bright. The lamps are lit. A street. A street with gardens. A man walking. Painfully. He holds the iron rails. He stops. There is fear in his eyes. On again he walks. The gardens end. On again he walks. A wide, open space, silent, empty. Once more he stops. His face is white. Agony. He looks around. Then on again. Then—a Cross. He sees it. He stops—he staggers—towards it. He falls from it. He turns. He tries to rise. Again he falls. His limbs quiver. He is still. . . . He is still. . . . Over his form broods a shadow. A shadow—dark—shapeless. Has it no face? No form? A woman, a woman! . . . She has gone."

There was silence. Joan felt her hands still quivering in the grasp that had passed from icy chilliness to burning heat.

"Cannot you see?" she cried. "Cannot you see?"

His hands fell limply from hers. The golden-yellow light came again. He had sunk back in his chair as though exhausted. But she could not spare him.

"Cannot you see? What did you see? Tell me all you saw."

"I cannot see," came in a half-dazed tone. "I did not see—only what you saw." And for the moment Joan hardly knew whether she had seen or only heard.

"It was a woman," she whispered. "A woman did it?"

"No—I do not know—the truth will come through a woman."

"Cannot you see again?"

"No."

"Another day, perhaps?"

"I shall never see more. You must go."

CHAPTER XIII

NUMBER THREE

'I say, Spider, I have just had a brain-wave, an inspiration, an absolute flash of second-sight!"

"The only second-sight you get, laddie, is when you see two primroses by the river's brim, where Nature planted one."

"This is sober solemn fact, Spider. A stirring of the grey matter, a revelation."

"Well, tell me about it," and Bruce Graham, having lit a cigarette, passed the box across to his friend and neighbour, Ned Lamport, who, still attired in his dressing-gown and slippers and with a large piece of toast in his hand, had apparently rushed from his breakfast-table to bring his tidings to the flat on the floor above.

"It's about old Brannock. We know Rollo is innocent, but the question is who is guilty. That is where we are all stuck. I've been trying to think it out for myself, Spider. Yesterday I bought five mystery books and read every word of them. Now I see a great light."

"That's good, laddie. Diffuse it."

"The point is this. In every case the fellow who did the dirty work was the last fellow you'd

think of suspecting. Consequently, we've not got to consider who is the most likely person to have killed Sir Nicholas, but who is the most unlikely. You follow me ? "

" Not altogether, Ned. You see, after Porter had got Rollo arrested I said something very like that to him. I told him that appearances were deceptive, and it was seldom that the person who seemed most guilty was the actual criminal."

" What did he say ? "

" He said I was wrong. He declared that in real life and probably in fiction, too, though he could not answer for that, the guilty person is invariably the most likely person. The difficulty is, according to him, that until we know all the facts we do not know who the most likely person is. In this case he thinks he has got all the facts that matter and therefore his conclusion is correct."

" I say he is wrong. In every case it was the unlikely person—the party you never thought of at all—who was guilty.

" Does your brain storm, your inspiration, your blinding light, carry you any further than that ? "

" It does. Tell me this, Spider," and he waved his toast impressively, " which of all the people who gave evidence at that inquest would you regard as the most unlikely to have killed Sir Nicholas ? "

" I hardly know, Ned. I should think you were as unlikely as most."

" Don't be silly, Spider. This is serious. Of course I am referring to the people he met on the Saturday night. I will tell you. The most un-

likely is Lord Liverdale, and I don't mind betting he is the man ! "

" That is a bit of inspiration, laddie. Liverdale is an unpleasant person whose politics are most objectionable. I am glad you have found him out. Do we hang him on that, or is the case even stronger ? "

" He admits he had a drink with Brannock—what more easy than to put the poison in ? Nitro-benzol is used in making explosives, and during the war Liverdale had a big job in the explosives department ; I know for I've looked it up. And he had a motive. Do you know, Spider, Brannock was asked to stand for Parliament and Liverdale's son would have been the man on the other side ? What do you make of that ? "

" It's wonderful, Ned, quite wonderful. I'll see that Egan hears about it. As Querit said, every possible murderer adds a grain of doubt. Anyway we must discover the next candidate against Liverdale's son and warn him never to drink with the old villain. Why, if you had not unmasked him, Liverdale might have poisoned one by one dozens of aspiring M.P.'s. Hullo, who is this ? "

" Good morning, Mr. Graham, I was wondering if you could spare me a little time this morning ? "

" As much as you like. I think you know my friend, Mr. Lamport ? Ned, this is Mr. Grice Chester, our detective. You and he should do great things together."

" I thought if you could spare the time you might pay a call with me," said Chester, nodding to the man in the dressing-gown.

"I must finish my breakfast and dress," said Lamport. "I had to tell you that when I had worked it all out," he added to his friend, as he reached the door. "I'll let you know more later on."

"Where are we to go?" asked Bruce of the detective when they were alone.

"I want to call on Miss Gayton. She has refused to see me, but I thought if you came, too, she might admit us."

"I will come, but I do not know her, and she may refuse again."

"As you are such a friend of Sir Rollo's I expect she will see you. Probably he has mentioned your name."

"By all means let us try if you think it is any good," said Bruce. "What do you hope to get from her?"

"There are two things. In the first place I want to find out if she is against Sir Rollo, or if she is merely neutral. You see, Sir, it is like this; suppose for the time being they are both innocent. Miss Gayton is cute enough to see that if Sir Rollo is cleared it will look as though she might be guilty. The object of Mr. Querit's questions was to show that Sir Nicholas might have been poisoned while in her flat. He was there an hour and a half. If she is innocent herself she may, from sheer fright, try and make things look black for Sir Rollo, to prevent any risk of her appearing guilty. If she is really guilty she will not scruple to harm him as much as possible. So I want to discover what she really feels about things—that is, if I can."

" Yes, I see all of that," said Bruce. " What is the other thing ? "

" That is rather different and rather curious, and perhaps more important. I do not think Inspector Porter made all the inquiries he might have done. Possibly we shall teach him something ! Rose Darlow, Miss Gayton's maid, is devoted to her mistress, and it is impossible to discover anything from her. But I have been making friends with the maids in the adjoining flats. They are quite willing to talk ! In fact, they feel a little reflected glory in working in the block where so much has happened ! The kitchens of these flats are quite close to one another, just opposite sides of a narrow recess or area. When the windows are open, you can not only see what is happening in the opposite room, but you can hear what is said."

" What did happen ? "

" The popular theory," said Grice Chester slowly, " the story as told at the inquest, is that Sir Rollo discovered the meal prepared for his uncle, and after he had gone the uncle stayed and enjoyed it. If my surmise is correct, Sir Rollo thought the meal was for his uncle, but Sir Nicholas believed it was for his nephew ! That gave him an added pleasure when he stopped and ate it. But, in point of fact, that dinner was not prepared for either of them ! "

" That is rather extraordinary. Can you prove it ? Of course, Miss Gayton told Rollo she was expecting a girl friend, but we all imagined that was bunkum and she was keeping the coast clear for Sir Nicholas. If she was expecting a girl friend why did not the girl turn up ? "

"She was not expecting a girl friend, she was expecting *another man.* This man did turn up. He arrived while Sir Nicholas was at dinner and he was sent away."

"By Jove, Chester! That puts a new light on things! A third man! Miss Gayton believes in having plenty of beaux to her string. But this seems to be a meeker specimen than the others. If he is invited to dinner with a fair lady, a dinner he no doubt thought he was more or less indirectly paying for, it seems almost an excess of good nature to go quietly away and leave the other fellow to eat it! Are you sure you have got the facts right?"

"So far as I have told them to you I am pretty sure of them. But there is a good deal yet that we want to know."

Bruce looked at him for a moment. He began to feel more respect for his shrewdness and enterprise than he had previously done.

"There is a lot we want to know," he said. "We want to know who this Number Three is, what his relations with Miss Gayton are, why he went off so quietly, and whether he came into contact with Sir Nicholas later in the evening."

"Exactly," said the detective, nodding approvingly. "If Number Three was another lover it may give a new motive for Miss Gayton to wish to get rid of Sir Nicholas. Or, if we can show that Number Three met Sir Nicholas later that evening, we have an entirely new line of investigation that may clear up the whole business."

"How do you propose to proceed?" asked Bruce.

"As I said at first," said Chester, "I want you to come with me to see Miss Gayton. We may get something—possibly even the truth—from her. Especially if she does not know how much we have already discovered. We, of course, run the risk that she may deny everything and send a warning to Number Three. If she does that we must get Inspector Porter to help us. In any event it seems to me we must help Sir Rollo's case. You hang a man with a chain of evidence. If some of the links are faulty he may escape!"

"Let us go to Miss Gayton," said Bruce

CHAPTER XIV

LILLA GAYTON

IT did not take long to reach the block of flats at the Westminster end of Victoria Street where Miss Gayton lived. It was a small block and they were small flats. In pre-war days the rental value would no doubt have been about £150 per annum. Now an offer of twice that rent would probably fail to secure one, and tenants who wished to move could generally pocket several hundreds of pounds in the way of premium to console them for the loss of their cramped and inconvenient quarters.

On arrival Bruce rang at the bell, and when the door was opened by the faithful Rose Darlow, she kept the chain up and spoke through the narrow aperture this permitted. It was therefore her own fault that she failed to perceive that he was not alone.

He gave her his card and said he wished to see Miss Gayton. She took the card and shut the door. A minute or two later she opened it and asked him to walk in. Both men entered.

"You!" said Rose, as she saw Grice Chester.

"He is with me," said Bruce. It was too late to take exception, so she ushered them both into a sitting-

room and then withdrew, no doubt to inform her mistress who the second visitor was.

The room in which they found themselves was probably the only reception-room in the suite. It was not a bad-sized apartment and was light and lofty. It possessed a gate-legged table that could seat four for a meal, but could be pushed away in a recess when not required. A piano with a mechanical player, a cramped desk in inlaid satinwood, and a wide, low settee were the other most notable items of furniture, the settee having the place of honour opposite to the fire. The room seemed adapted for all moods and for all uses. Round the walls there were several shelves, and on them stood a number of ornaments, not of an expensive character. There were also a few books, and the general effect was of cleanliness and comfort, without severity in the matter of tidiness.

A few minutes passed before the mistress of the apartment entered. When she did so, she went straight to Bruce Graham, without holding out her hand, and said :

" You are Rollo Brannock's friend. He told me about you and I saw you in court. Why have you brought this man ? Twice already I have refused to see him."

" We are both Rollo Brannock's friends, Miss Gayton. He is working with us to establish Rollo's innocence, and we want your help, too."

" How can I help you ? You have heard all I have to say."

She had not sat down nor had she invited him to do so. She stood confronting him, her big blue eyes fixed on his. Her face was pale, although not powdered so

lavishly as when she was in court, and her lips no longer had the geranium tinting with which so many women make themselves repulsive. She was wrapped in a blue silk kimono on which large birds of vivid plumage were embroidered. It was Grice Chester who replied to her.

"We heard all you said in court, Miss Gayton, but we think there is more that you could say."

"Do you?" she retorted looking at him derisively. "I have had calls from reporters from all the newspapers and news agencies in London. They all think I might tell them something. Some have offered me hundreds of pounds for a special interview, or for a few articles. And they offered to write the articles themselves! But I told them, as I tell you, what I had to say was said in court. I have nothing to add to it."

"Just this, Miss Gayton," said Bruce quietly. "I am Rollo's friend, you are the girl he hoped at one time to marry. Do you believe him innocent of the crime he is charged with?"

There was silence in the room, silence broken only by the ticking of a cheap clock in a showy pearl case on the mantel shelf. The girl seemed to be thinking, thinking. And they were waiting.

"What is the value of my opinion?" she said at last. "I have told what I could. You must fight your case yourselves."

"There is one important thing, Miss Gayton," interposed Grice Chester. "Sir Rollo says when he parted with his uncle he did not expect to see him again. You say there was a promise of another meeting. Are you sure of that? You see the vast importance of it? If Sir Rollo expected to meet his uncle again, almost at

once, it might lend colour to the suggestion that he obtained poison. If he did not expect to see him, there would be no object in getting poison. That whole point turns on your evidence. Were you not mistaken in suggesting anything was said about another meeting ? "

" Why do you badger and pester me ? Your solicitor asked me all that. I was on oath and I spoke the truth."

" You see the importance of it to Sir Rollo. May you not have made a mistake ? "

" You mean will I help your friend—and perjure myself to do it ? After all, someone poisoned Sir Nicholas."

" That, at least, is true," said Chester meaningly. " If Sir Rollo did not do it, who did ? "

" You mean I did ? Oh, yes, I know what people are saying ! Malicious fools ! Why should I kill Sir Nicholas ? Rollo had left me—left me as he was sure to do when he knew. Sir Nicholas was all I had. Now I have lost everything ! "

" Miss Gayton, we wish to believe you as innocent as we believe Rollo, but if you only tell us part of the truth, how can we ? " It was Bruce who spoke in a very quiet, but definite tone.

" Why do you say I only told you part of the truth?"

" Because you have never said for whom the dinner on that Saturday night was really prepared ? "

" What do you mean ? " The girl looked at him in sudden fear, her eyes were open wider than before and there was a new tone in her voice.

" You know what we mean," said Grice Chester, more harshly. " As you say, you took the oath to tell

the truth and the whole truth. You did not tell the truth about that dinner. You said in court it was prepared for Sir Nicholas. That was not true, for you were not expecting Sir Nicholas."

"Thank you," she said, somewhat recovering her composure. "If anyone makes insinuations against me I can now refer them to you, Mr. ——. I don't know your name. As I was not expecting Sir Nicholas it shows I did not prepare a poisoned banquet, doesn't it?"

Bruce Graham looked a little annoyed at the detective. He did not think anything would be gained by trying to bully the girl.

"I told you, Miss Gayton," he said, "that we wished to believe you innocent. We know Rollo thought that meal was prepared for his uncle, and we believe his uncle thought it was meant for Rollo. My friend is probably wrong in saying that you stated in court it was prepared for Sir Nicholas. Everyone took it for granted that he was the friend you were expecting and so you were never actually asked."

"I was not asked," said the girl.

"I ask you now. Who was it?"

"I have not said it was not Sir Nicholas."

"We know it was not. You were not expecting either Sir Nicholas or Rollo. The third man arrived later and was sent away. Who was the third man?"

"Suppose I say there was no third man?" and she raised her head with something of her former defiance."

"If you say that," said Bruce, "then we know that you are working against us, and we must work against you. You are not helping us to find the truth."

"But it will be found," added Grice Chester, in his

harder manner. " We shall tell the police all we know and they will ferret out every little secret. Remember, you will have to stand cross-examination by Sir James Egan. If he shows you had a third lover, even if that lover is never traced, will people believe you then ? Will that prove you did not poison Sir Nicholas ? It is not necessary to prepare a poisoned banquet. The poison can be added afterwards if the wrong man is taking the banquet ! And you had just seen the uncle and nephew quarrel. What a good chance to foist the crime on to the nephew by swearing you heard them arrange to meet again later ! What does it matter what you tell us when we know so much ? "

The girl had sunk on to her settee. She seemed crushed and frightened by this forcible attack. Grice Chester had not finished.

" Suppose you did not poison Sir Nicholas, who can say what that other lover, the man you are shielding, did ? Who can say there was no time and no place during that evening when he may have traced him and found opportunity to administer the fatal dose ? We know the meal was meant for him, and he arrived and found someone else with you, enjoying it. Your silence may tell more than your speech is likely to ! "

Still there was no reply. The girl pressed her handkerchief to her eyes and the pearl clock murmured its Swiss tick-tick while the two men waited for her to speak. Bruce felt uncomfortable. He hated to browbeat a woman and Grice Chester's methods were not his methods ; but for Rollo's sake he must learn the truth.

At last she raised her head, and addressing Bruce Graham, she said : " If I tell you the truth, and it

does not affect Sir Nicholas Brannock's death, will you swear not to use it against me or have it dragged out in court ? "

" Unless it affects the fact of Rollo's innocence, I swear not to use what you tell us," said Bruce.

" And you ? " she said, turning to Grice Chester.

" I act under instructions," he replied. " If Mr. Graham bids me be silent, I am silent."

There was another pause. The girl got up from the settee and went to the bureau near the piano. Then she hesitated. She turned to them as though she had changed her mind and would still defy them. They watched her without speaking. Then she turned again and opened the bureau and took some papers from a locked drawer.

" You are right, she said," as she faced them once more, " there was a third man, though how you knew it I cannot imagine. But you are wrong to call him a third lover. In my way I am straight, for I have never had more than one man at a time. It is not every respectable married lady who can say that ! But the man, the third man, was my husband."

" Your husband ! " The words came from them both, incredulous, amazed.

" Yes, my husband ! "

" How could you become engaged to Sir Rollo Brannock if you had a husband ? " asked Grice Chester.

" I said I would tell you," and she held herself more boldly as the time of concealment was past. " I was married when I was nineteen. We were not happy. I tried to get a divorce. The law is sometimes very cruel. No doubt I was not free from blame. The

divorce was refused, but we were judicially separated. I had no money and I could not marry again. I managed as best I could. Sir Nicholas was not the first, but I was straight with each as long as he wanted me. Then my husband found me again, found me living under the protection of Sir Nicholas. He was in a bad way, he had been ill and he had been unlucky. I gave him money. He came here from time to time and I was glad to see him. Don't think he blackmailed me. He did not have to. I was glad to see him, for life is not very jolly for a girl like me with nothing to do, with no friends, and with only a short visit perhaps twice or three times a week from Sir Nicholas. It became a regular thing for my husband to come to dinner with me every Saturday night. Sir Nicholas never came then. How he chanced to come on that fatal Saturday I cannot imagine. He often came without warning me, but never before on a Saturday.

"Then I met Rollo. I loved him. Perhaps you will think such as I should not speak of love. He spoke of marriage. Whether he really meant to marry me I hardly knew. Talk of marriage is often a move in the game. Some men promise it—at some future date. Some men frankly say it is impossible. Some merely laugh at it. In the end it is all the same. . . . Rollo spoke of marriage, but whether he meant marriage or not, I was prepared to throw over everything to go to him.

"The next day was Saturday and my husband was due to dinner as usual. I could not put him off as I did not know where to write or wire to. I have his address, but he wanders about and might not get a letter for days. Besides, I wanted to see him. I

wanted to tell him about Rollo and to ask him if it would be possible to get things put straight if Rollo really wanted to marry me. I do not understand the law very well, and I am told it has been altered. I was quite willing to give him all the money I could if he would help me to make things right. So I determined to give him a nice dinner and to tell him it was the last he must have, although I would still help him. I had told Rollo a girl friend was to dine with me and promised to meet him later.

" Then, while I was waiting, Rollo came. I loved his coming, but was in agony lest he should stay too long. Then Sir Nicholas came! You know what happened. Sir Nicholas thought I was secretly entertaining Rollo and he was proud of his success in making Rollo go. He told me to choose. What was the choice? I saw then that Rollo really meant marriage, and with him it was marriage or nothing. And I saw it could not be marriage, for even if I was free he would never marry me after what I had been to his uncle. So I chose. I gave him back his ring. And he went. . . .

" I slipped into the kitchen and told Rose to keep a look-out for Mr. Seymour—she did not know he had been my husband—and to send him away directly he came. I gave her five pounds for him and said I would write.

" That is the whole story. Sir Nicholas had dinner with me and then left. I think that meeting Rollo made him like me better, for he said he would give me some pearls and would come and see me more often. He was always good to me. Now I don't know what will happen to me."

She threw herself down again on the settee as she stopped speaking. Both the men had listened intently to her story. It was Bruce who broke the silence.

"You do not think what you have told us can in any way affect or explain Sir Nicholas' death?"

"How can it? Mr. Seymour had no grudge against him, quite the reverse, and he had never heard of Rollo. Do not picture my husband as a jealous man. He knows he has no claim on me and it only amused him that Sir Nicholas was in a way providing for us both."

"Why do you object to the whole story being known?"

"My husband has been very ill. He has been mixed up in one or two things that were not quite right. If the police go for him it will almost certainly get him into trouble—although it has nothing to do with Sir Nicholas."

The two men looked at one another. They were considering her strange story. If it was true it did not explain in any way how Sir Nicholas met his fate. Then Bruce gave his decision.

"Miss Gayton, my promise holds good. I thank you for being so frank with us. Can you give us your husband's address and any details that will verify your story? I do not doubt it, but for Rollo's sake we must be sure."

"My husband lodges at 7b, Leith Street, Camden Road. You will generally find him there, although he goes away to race meetings. As to proofs"—she held out the little bundle of documents she had removed from her bureau—"here is my marriage certificate. My maiden name was Lilla Gayton, and I resumed it

when we parted. Here is a photograph of the two of us taken soon after our marriage, and here are papers and newspaper cuttings about our separation."

She tossed the documents to Grice Chester, who untied the ribbon with which they were fastened and read them carefully. He asked if he might borrow the photograph as it would help to identify the husband whom he thought he ought to see. She let him have it.

The men then rose to go, and the girl said rather falteringly to Bruce :

" How is Sir Rollo ? Have you seen him ? "

" Yes. I have seen him twice. Naturally he is worried and anxious, but is sure that the truth must come out. On his behalf I thank you for what you have told us, although it does not help us much."

" I am afraid it does not. I knew it would not. But, oh, Mr. Graham, if you could tell him from me how sorry I am ? And I am sure he is innocent."

They shook hands at parting.

CHAPTER XV

JOAN AND HER BOYS.

THE two men walked back from Victoria Street to Sloane Street. For some way they went in silence. The detective was a little crestfallen. He had stumbled on what looked like a very important clue, the third man in the case, and the fact that both the Brannocks were deceived in thinking the meal was for the other. Lilla Gayton had given her explanation and, although the story had been remarkable enough in its way, it did not seem to help them. It neither threw light on the question who poisoned Sir Nicholas nor did it clear away any of the points against Sir Rollo.

Bruce Graham was silent, too, and in a way equally disappointed. He did not feel the loss of a personal triumph as Grice Chester did, but he realised that time was going rapidly by and the defence had not yet unearthed any new facts of real value. He was also wondering if he liked working with his present companion. Of course one had to get at the truth, but it was not pleasant to have to bully and threaten a woman to do it. Perhaps the detective realised what was in his thoughts, for he said:

"It was a good job I was firm with that girl or we should never have got her story out of her."

"I think she would have told us when she realised we were not hostile."

"I don't. She only told when she found we knew a lot and could discover the rest. The question is, is her tale reliable?"

"I am inclined to believe it," replied Bruce. "If you trace this man Seymour you will be able to verify a good deal of it."

"Her ideas of marriage and separation and re-marriage are somewhat loose."

"I do not think that is suspicious. My experience is that women are often very vague about the law in these matters. In fact, they do not see what the law has to do with them. They think people ought to settle marital questions as they wish and the law should not interfere."

"Perhaps so. Anyway I think we shall have to bring in this husband business at the trial."

"We promised not to."

"We promised not to unless it would help Sir Rollo."

"How can it help him?"

"Sir James Egan could make a lot of it. It would be a fresh sensation. It would discredit Miss Gayton and would strengthen the prejudice of those who already suspect she had a finger in it."

"That will not do," Bruce rejoined firmly. "A promise is a promise and we must stick to it. Besides I suggested that sort of thing to Sir Rollo after our first talk. He would not hear of it. 'Of course I want to use every step to clear myself,' he said, 'but I would sooner suffer than have other innocent people dragged into it, as I have been.' So you see it's up

to us to find the guilty party and not bespatter a lot more who are not guilty."

"That sounds very well," said the detective, "but it is wrong. It is the job of the police to catch the guilty party and prove him guilty. Our job is to get Sir Rollo off, guilty or not. It will help us to do that if we can show others *might* have been guilty."

"Do not say we must get Sir Rollo off, guilty or not," replied Bruce warmly. "He is not guilty and we will prove it."

The detective shrugged his shoulders and made no reply.

The days went by, and one evening Bruce found himself sitting in the drawing-room in Hans Place discussing matters with his relations.

"Have you heard how Sir Rollo is bearing up?" asked Auntie Angela.

"I saw him again yesterday," he answered. "He is keeping quite fit, but the worry of it all is very wearing. However innocent a man may be it is an awful thing to be locked away on such a charge. The trouble is, we do not seem to be making any progress. Querit goes to see him most days, and has frequent consultations with Egan, but so far there is very little to shake the prosecution story. They have got their precious time-table and we cannot dispute it. Their theory seems to hold together without a flaw and we cannot deny their facts. All we can do is to say that Rollo never took the poison in Wilberforce's room and, of course, never used it. We cannot deny that he had the opportunity, we can only deny that he had the desire to avail himself of it. The question is will the jury accept that denial."

" They must ! " said Joan.

" They have been busy on the medical side," added Bruce. " We shall have plenty of doctors to swear that nitro-benzol might not take effect for more than two-and-a-half hours, and there are cases where death has resulted in less than one hour. It seems to be a drug that is very uncertain in that way, but apparently no one is prepared to deny that ten-thirty to one o'clock is a reasonable interval."

" But haven't they really got any hope ? " asked Joan, almost despondently. She was looking very pretty, but paler than usual. Bruce knew she was suffering, and longed to say comforting things to her, but it was not easy.

" They have every hope," he said stoutly. " Not, I am afraid, of proving his innocence. That, you know, is not easy unless you can prove someone else guilty. But they hope to create reasonable doubts and so secure an acquittal. They have great faith in Sir James Egan's way with a jury."

" I hate these cynical lawyers," said Joan, almost with a sob. " It is only a kind of a game for them, a sort of chess-board. The man's honour counts for nothing. The game is played by the lawyers and the best player wins. Neither seems to care about the man himself, but only wants to win the game."

" It sometimes looks like that," said Bruce soothingly, " but it is not so really. You see the other side, the prosecution, has got a lot of powerful pieces and so far we have only a few pawns. You have to do wonders with pawns to beat castles, bishops and rooks ! All the same, we will do it. Now, what about your bright boys ? "

He had come round that evening, having promised to go with her to the gymnastic class she gave once a week to her Sunday scholars. Since this trouble came she had given up all her social engagements. Rollo was now nothing to her, but she simply could not go to dances and jollifications while he was lying in prison under that awful cloud. She had given up everything but her "boys," and even that it was sometimes hard to persevere with. She had a rude shock one evening.

"Say, Miss Joan," one of the young rascals had said to her, "is that bloke wot is going to be 'anged for poisoning his uncle the same as the toff wot sometimes came 'ere with you? I say 'e is, but Bill Bray says 'e ain't."

A sickly, dizzy feeling seemed to come over her, but she managed to keep control of herself.

"Sir Rollo Brannock is the friend who sometimes came here, Joe," she replied, "but you are quite wrong about him. It is a sad, terrible mistake. He did not poison his uncle and the truth will soon be known."

"Oh," said Joe, "you are one of those wot believes the girl done it. I dare say you are right. I liked Sir Rollo, but I dunno that I ever met a bloke wot 'ad done a murder." There was a slight note of regret in his tone, but he added more brightly, "anyway I've seed the spot where they found the uncle's corpse."

"Is it really true, Bruce," she asked as they left the house. "Is it really true that we have discovered nothing at all?"

"My dear Joan, don't weep, but keep your powder dry, as Cromwell used to say."

" I am not weeping, and I don't powder—anyway, not to be noticed. But you must answer my question. Are we doing nothing ? "

" We are doing all we can, but it leads us nowhere. Grice Chester thought he had a big clue a few days ago and it certainly looked like it. But it was a washout." He told her of the discovery of the " third man " and the long talk at Lilla Gayton's flat. Then he added :

" Chester has been following up this Edmund Seymour. He ran him to earth at Camden Town. He seems a harmless sort of individual. He said when Lilla Gayton's maid sent him away with the money, he went straight back to Camden Town and picked up three friends and had refreshment with them. Then they went to a billiard saloon and played in a snooker tournament all the evening. Chester saw his friends and they confirmed the story, and he went to the billiard saloon and he found they had still got the score sheet with all the names on it. So I do not think Seymour comes into our story at all. Did you not tell me you had had a great idea ? "

" Nothing great, as it turned out. After hearing what Mrs. Raeton said about Gabriel Jowlett I 'phoned for a consultation. I got there and it was all rather dark and creepy. We clutched hands and looked at a crystal ball, and we saw—or he saw and told me—even now I don't know which—we saw Sir Nicholas Brannock going home through Eaton Square and Sloane Square and he fell at the foot of the cross. A shadowy shape seemed to hover over him and Gabriel Jowlett muttered ' a woman ! ' Then, somehow, the lights came on and it was all over."

"A woman. That doesn't carry us far, though Rollo is not a woman!"

"I asked if he meant a woman had done it, but he only muttered 'the truth comes through a woman.' I wanted him to try again but he seemed used up, exhausted. I don't know whether he really saw anything, or whether it was only fake."

"Fake I should think, for after all he only described what everyone knew already. Your spooks don't seem to carry us any further than my third man."

"No. It's ghastly, Bruce. Nearly half the time has gone and we seem to have done nothing."

Joan was eagerly greeted by her class when she entered the gymnasium. Her eye ran quickly over the assembled urchins, and she at once asked.

"Where is Willie Mason?"

"He's ill, Miss Joan, and the doctor says he must stay in for several days."

"Right, then I must see him. Now get ready for drill."

She slipped into a little alcove and removing her coat, emerged in a serviceable gym dress, a serge jacket nearly to her knees, neat knickers, black stockings, and white shoes.

"First we will show Mr. Graham what we can do over the horse," and forming them into line they ran round the room, taking a flying leap over the vaulting-horse as they went. Some of the boys were pretty useful, but not one of them ran or jumped with the neatness of their leader. Then there was some musical drill, then they swung along a horizontal ladder on their hands. Soon after that there was a short interval for coffee and buns.

"It is quite wonderful," said Bruce. "How did you get them so well in hand?"

"They have never been much trouble," said Joan. "Do you see that big boy, Harry Green," pointing to a lad of about eighteen. "He is my second in command. I had a bit of a battle with him once. His little brother used to come, and Harry said he shouldn't. I fetched him, and Harry came to carry him off. So I said we would fight it out!"

"How did you do that?"

"We put on masks and took single-sticks. I told him to hit me as hard as he could. Of course I knew the guards. He did get me a deuce of a welt one time, but it was nothing to the lathering I gave him! Since then we've been great chums. Now, boys! Mr. Graham is going to show us the grand circle and other marvellous feats on the horizontal bar!"

So, before long, Bruce found himself perspiring with the best of them. And he rejoiced to see the brighter colour in Joan's cheek and the sparkle in her eye. It was good that she had some distractions in these sad days.

CHAPTER XVI

"WHOSE MONEY?"

THREE or four days after the visit to the gymnasium, Bruce received a telephone message from Joan Wedderburn asking him to come round at once to see her. He found her, as usual, in her own little den. It was a tiny room, decorated and upholstered in a soft tone of grey, and was suggestive of the many moods of its mistress. There was a really serviceable desk for her correspondence, two rows of books in which poetry and serious prose outnumbered the fiction, fencing foils and a tennis racquet hung from hooks, and a bag of golf clubs stood in the corner. In another corner there was a pair of Indian clubs, though the room was too small to swing them in. There were three comfortable chairs, and on one of them a tiny, but very alert griffon was enthroned. On the walls were photographs of many friends, but groups predominated. Groups of hockey teams, mixed cricket teams, and swimming teams. Groups of girl gymnasts and groups of her boys' class. It looked what it was, the indoor room of an outdoor girl.

"Have you any news?" she asked, when Bruce entered. There was a suppressed excitement in her

tone, but she wanted to hear what he had been doing before she made her own report.

" No news, I am afraid," he said. " Ned Lamport is the only one of us who really seems to achieve anything. He got back late last night with a cut cheek, a black eye, a torn coat, and minus his collar. He is a fine chap, Ned."

" What had he been doing ? "

" He is looking for the unlikely man. For some time he was sleuthing old Lord Liverdale, but as he could not bring anything home to him he bought six more mystery stories and studied them carefully. He found in four of them that the crime was done by some anarchist, bolshevist, or other alien villain. Where in our case, he asked himself, do we find the hand of the unsuspected foreigner ? And at once he remembered Henri Verquer, the unpleasant looking waiter at the Critz. What easier than for him to have put poison in Sir Nicholas Brannock's food ? Why should he do it ? If he belonged to a secret society there might be many motives for removing a notable public man. So Ned nobly disguised himself and tracked Verquer to his haunts in Soho. He found that he did belong to some kind of a club that met in an underground kitchen. After a lot of trouble, Ned gained admittance there and heard a good deal of revolutionary talk. The second night he was noticed and questioned. Then he was thrown out, damaged but not daunted. That is as far as he has got, but I am afraid no one else has got much further."

" He is a jolly good sort to try so hard," said Joan, still hugging her own secret news.

"He is, and you know, Joan, it is rather an awful thought that if one of these Soho celebrities could get engaged at the Critz or the Charlton he has only to get command of the soup vat for a single day to wipe out much of what is brightest and best in our land."

"There is no other news?"

"I have called on Querit, and he sees Rollo every day, but there does not appear to be anything fresh. Egan is said to be hopeful, but we are very much where we were. I went to Camden Town and saw Edmund Seymour, Lilla Gayton's husband. He is a washy sort of individual, but not, I think, vicious. He admits treating Lilla rather badly in their young days, but feels no shame in sponging on her now. After they parted he had pneumonia twice, and other troubles, and he is not the gay dog he was. I told him that for his own sake and for hers it would be best to tell the whole story of that Saturday night dinner. I am afraid it does not help Rollo, but it would be awkward for them if the truth came out in some other way. I said Lilla wanted to suppress it for his sake, but he grinned and said he did not mind."

"Then he is not afraid of the police?"

"Apparently not. He makes some sort of a living as a racing tipster. He says to people that he can give winners for races, and if he is wrong they pay him nothing. If he is right they pay him the odds to half-a-crown. That means, if you were going to put ten shillings on a horse you put twelve and six. If it loses, well, he is in the same boat with you. If it wins you hand him the winnings of the half-crown—at

eight to one it means a pound. It sounds fair enough, but he explained to me that if there were ten horses running he tipped each in turn to his clients, so if a hundred people took his tips ten were sure to get the winner! His only trouble is that people are not always honest! They sometimes forget to pay over his share."

"I suppose you told Mr. Querit about Miss Gayton and her husband?"

"Yes. I had promised not to, but they both agreed that I might. It would not have been right to suppress it. Egan may be rather severe on Lilla Gayton for not mentioning it before, but she says she was not asked."

"Now, Bruce, I think I have got some news for you." She spoke quietly, but it was evident she had something important to tell. She had wanted to hear all he had to say, although she was bursting with her own story. She knew, too, that he told her a lot of not very important things to keep her courage up. This, however, was important, and it might throw light on the whole mystery.

"Well, old girl, what is it?"

He took a cigarette as he spoke and handed her his case. Absently she helped herself to one and then threw it into the fire-place.

"You know the half-hour in the time-table that we cannot account for?" she said. "I have always worried about that, and I believe I have found where Sir Nicholas went after he left Miss Gayton and before he called on Rollo—between a quarter past nine and ten o'clock!"

"By Jove, that's important! Where was it?"

"He called on Joe Levy, the money-lender."

"On Joe Levy—why should a chap like Sir Nicholas who is rolling in wealth call on a money-lender?"

"Never mind why for the moment. The question is, did he? You remember when you came to my gym one of the boys, Willie Mason, was away ill? Well, I went to his home to see what was wrong. He's got chicken-pox, poor little devil. He lives in Bagshaw's Buildings, what I suppose would be called workmen's dwellings. On the staircase I met Myrtle Turner. She used to go to school with me, a jolly good sort, played in my hockey team. You'll see her in that group. She looked down on her luck and I took her out to have some tea—this was last Saturday. She told me she lost her people in the war, and had been left with next to no money. She has a room in Bagshaw's Buildings. She took up type-writing, but it was not easy to get jobs and eventually she was engaged by Joe Levy. She has been with him for about two years, and says he is quite decent to her, although he is hard on people who do not pay up. She did not know much about Jock Randall who was driven to suicide by Joe Levy's threats."

"Of course she had heard of Rollo?"

"Yes. Talking of Joe Levy naturally made me think of Rollo, and I asked Myrtle if she knew that he had borrowed from her employer. She did, and that led us to talk of the Brannock case. Then, Bruce, she said something that made me sit up and take notice. She said Sir Nicholas had telephoned during the day that he would call and see Joe Levy at nine-thirty

that evening—that is the evening of the important Saturday, you know! Myrtle took the message, so she knows it's true."

"Did Sir Nicholas go?"

"That is the question. When Myrtle went to the office on the Monday she showed Levy the note in the paper asking for people who had seen Sir Nicholas to communicate with the police, but he said Sir Nicholas had never turned up. He expressed annoyance at wasting his evening, but no doubt Sir Nicholas had been ill. So Myrtle thought no more about it. But the question is, did Sir Nicholas keep the appointment? I say he did."

"No doubt you are right, but there are one or two things I do not quite understand. Is not nine-thirty rather late to call at a man's office? And why on earth should Sir Nicholas go to a money-lender? But—Joan—I think I have it! Old Nick, as you call him, had had the scrap with Rollo at Miss Gayton's flat and he wanted to bribe him to keep clear and to keep quiet. Knowing Rollo was in debt to Joe Levy he called to find out how much he owed and how deeply he was involved."

Bruce jumped up and took four steps across the little room. "That's it," he added, "and it fills in the time-table."

"But it does not quite fit the case," said Joan, shaking her head. "You forget that old Nick called by appointment, and had made the appointment while Myrtle was there in the morning. He didn't know then that he was going to meet Rollo."

"Where is Levy's office?" asked Bruce suddenly.

"I was coming to that. It is in Shaftesbury Avenue,

below the Palace Theatre. Marsh, the butler, says Sir Nicholas was a remarkably punctual man. If he had an appointment in Shaftesbury Avenue at nine-thirty he would leave Victoria Street at nine-fifteen. Perhaps he would not want to drive straight up to a money-lender's office, so he took a cab to, say, the Palace Theatre. Possibly he just took an omnibus to Piccadilly Circus. As it happened no one recognised him. He saw Joe Levy as arranged, and just before ten walked down Shaftesbury Avenue and picked up the taxi that took him to Rollo's rooms."

"That seems likely enough, but it still remains to find why he called on Levy and how any harm can have come to him there. Why in fact, to be blunt, should Levy want to poison him?"

"If he went there, and it was all straight and above board, why did Levy tell Myrtle he had not been? But I've some more to tell you. I did not think it all out at once, and had another long talk with Myrtle the next day. Sir Nicholas has called on Joe Levy quite often! Myrtle says he was there she believes at least once a month. Sometimes in the daytime, but more often by special appointment in the evening."

"Does Joe Levy live in Shaftesbury Avenue?"

"No. He has a flat there, but only uses it as an office. He lives in a cottage in a very quiet district near Datchet. He generally motors up and down. He leaves his office at five, but if he had a special appointment with Sir Nicholas, he let Myrtle and the two other clerks go and waited by himself."

"It is rather exciting, Joan. I always said you had more brain than all the rest of us put together. Is there anything else?"

Joan did not answer him immediately. She had perched herself on the edge of her desk and her hands were clasped round one of her knees. There was a thoughtful little frown on her usually smooth brow.

"There is something else," she said, "but first tell me this: whose money do money-lenders lend?"

"What do you mean?"

"Whose money do money-lenders lend?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it. I supposed they had piles and sacks of it all over the place. You just sign a letter agreeing to pay sixty pounds a month for the rest of your life and they let you have a couple of hundred in cash on your note of hand only."

"Would not they need a very big capital, Bruce, to keep on lending and lending? Is it not possible that rich men might lend money to money-lenders so as to get the benefit of the high rate of interest without their names becoming known?"

"It sounds quite possible."

"So that Sir Nicholas called on Joe Levy, not to borrow from him, but to invest money with him? We know Sir Nicholas was not above shady proceedings in one direction, may he not have been shady in more than one?"

"I can quite believe it, but it's jolly startling, you know, Joan. Have you anything definite to go upon?"

"Only this, when Sir Nicholas is expected, Joe Levy

always produces a little brass-bound book with a lock on it that he brings from his home. He and Sir Nicholas check it together. Myrtle told me about it. Of course she has never seen inside the book, but she generally got a glimpse of it before or after Sir Nicholas had called. She knows where Joe Levy keeps it, for once when he was ill she had to go to his house at Datchet and she saw him take it out of a secret drawer at the back of his desk. He almost fell in getting it so she could not help seeing, although he told her at once to go away. Bruce, we have got to get that brass-bound book!"

"Steal it, you mean?"

The girl nodded.

"That's a bit thick, Joan. What is it going to tell us when we get it?"

"It will tell us what the relations were between Joe Levy and Sir Nicholas Brannock, and probably it will tell us if they were together on the night of that Saturday."

She got off her desk and they stood for some moments facing one another in silence. Were they on the threshold of an important discovery?

"Don't you think," he said at last, speaking very slowly, "don't you think I had better tell all this to Inspector Porter and let him find out what it really means?"

"I do not," said the girl decisively. "Inspector Porter thinks he has an unanswerable case against Rollo. He is a good man, according to his lights. No doubt he would be quite willing to look into the matter for us. That means he would call on Joe

Levy and ask a few questions. It would give the alarm, and if there is anything secret in that book it would disappear. That is exactly what I want to prevent. I am quite willing to play what in crook dramas they call a lone hand, but I thought I would tell you about it first."

"Joan, my child, you don't think I am going to let you turn burglar? Suppose you were caught and got six months?"

"I know a jolly little magistrate who lives near here. He would let me down lightly, especially if I told him the whole story."

"You can't choose your magistrate, my dear, and it would not help if you could. A pal of mine played golf with a judge one day and the next day that same judge fined him forty bob because he pushed a policeman's hat off—just as though he had never met him. You can't trust them. Besides, when you break into people's houses there are all sorts of unpleasant things—dogs and guns—and things like that."

"My dear Bruce, it has got to be done."

"My dear Joan, you are not going to do it. I, Bruce Graham, barrister-at-law and prospective parliamentary candidate, I will do it. I will go a-burgling. If I get lagged I will stand for Hoxton, Haggerston, Hackney or Houndsditch—which ever place it is where the criminal classes most resort. I believe it begins with H. Perhaps it is Hampstead. It would endear me to my constituents, and surely burglars have a right to be represented in parliament."

"Do you really mean you will do it, Bruce?"

"I do, honour bright, I will get that brass-bound book or die in the attempt. How am I to set about it?"

"Dulver Dene, where Joe Levy lives, is quite a small house in Regis Road about a mile and a half from Datchet. It is in a very quiet spot and is well back from the road. There is no dog. Joe Levy is a widower and lives alone with two servants, a man and his wife. He also has a chauffeur who sleeps over the garage close by. I will go with you."

"No, Joan, you will not. You will stay here, and if I make a mess of it you will go to your jolly little magistrate, and get me out of it as best you can. Also you will go to Inspector Porter and put him on the trail as quickly as possible. It would never do for both of us to get put away at once! Where does Joe Levy keep the book? If it is in one of these steel safes I shall need a few lessons from some of my future constituents before I tackle it."

"It is not in a safe. He has a safe at his office, but this book is kept at the back of the first drawer on the right hand side of his desk. You may have to smash a bit to get at it, but if we are wrong we will send him the price of a new one. The desk stands opposite the fireplace in the right hand front room on the ground floor. The easiest place to enter the house is at the end of the passage at the back. There is a window there in leaded glass. The lead is quite soft and in five minutes you can get in."

"It sounds easy enough. I suppose everyone is so honest there that bolts and bars are hardly needed.

Sure the details are right ? Or ought I to get a little ' cat ' training and climb up the rain-water pipes —or slide in on the aerial ? "

" The details are all right. I went there last night."

" You went there ! "

" Yes, on my motor-bike, you know. I was in the grounds for quite a time and saw the man himself in his room at the desk, although I did not see his book. I waited till he shut up and put out the lights. I was tempted to have a go at it then, but I thought if I made a mess of things no one would know what I was after. So I thought I would tell you. But I'm quite willing to see it through, Bruce, if you would rather not do anything illegal."

" My dear Joan, for a Sunday School teacher you are the most marvellous product of the age ! It, however, is settled. I am the burglar, you wait behind and alarm Inspector Porter if I am not back to breakfast. If the burglar is caught you complain to the police ! Oh, Joan, how Rollo will enjoy all this when we have him free again."

" Do you—do you think we shall have him free ? " And with a sudden re-action, her eyes were filled with tears.

" Of course we shall ! You are just wonderful, and we are not going to fail this time. But, Joan, are we not rather forgetting your friend Myrtle Turner ? "

" How do you mean ? "

" Won't old Levy find out that she has been giving him away, and she will lose her job ? "

" She will lose that anyhow. Do you think I would leave her there, now I have found her ? I'll get her

something better than that. Of course she's a girl who ought to marry. She would make a ripping wife. She's not exactly pretty and she has just the tiniest squint, but it gives her an interesting expression. In every other way—Bruce! don't you think you would like a wife?"

He looked at her a moment, and then smiled and shook his head.

"Burglars make bad husbands, Joan. So often out at night. Try someone else."

CHAPTER XVII

QUERIT IS ANNOYED

GREGORY QUERIT sat in his office in Bedford Row, hastily gulping his tea. There was a time, not so long ago, when tea was unknown in solicitors' offices. Work proceeded from lunch time to five-thirty or six without a break. There are still a few firms who work on the old Spartan lines, but most houses now give to principals and assistants alike the gentle refresher at four o'clock. Perhaps the change came when the old copying clerks were ousted by lady shorthand-typists.

Querit gulped his tea and brushed the crumbs of his cake from the document he was perusing. A few stray currants he dropped into his mouth. He set a good example to his staff. Tea was allowed them, but there was no need to waste time over it. It was just as easy to go on working. Querit believed in work. He sat in a revolving leather chair in front of a wide table. On this table were packets of papers tied neatly with red tape and all labelled " re " something important. Round his room were iron deed boxes inscribed with the names of notable clients. It is true that behind the lid that bore in bold lettering " The Marmaduke Estates " he kept his tobacco

jar and a bottle of whisky, but for the most part the inscriptions were genuine and the clientèle real. His hard work had been rewarded.

He glanced at the clock and resumed the study of his document. He had had an unsatisfactory afternoon. Callers had arrived, and they had lingered and his work had got behind. A lady who had just left him had taken half an hour to get to the real point of her call. She had told a long story of her faithless husband's wrong doings. Querit had been shocked, sympathetic and indignant. Clearly such infamous conduct called for separation or divorce. Yet the suffering one hesitated. He said the proceedings would no doubt be simple and expeditious. Still she hesitated. Then she asked how much of her husband's income she could rely on if she got rid of him. And when she heard the reply she departed to think matters over.

The document was completed and a note put at the foot that it was approved as altered in blue ink—there being already alterations in red and green inks. Then another document was seized, but it was put aside as the door opened and Grice Chester, the detective, was announced.

"Ah, Chester," said the solicitor. "I wanted to see you. Sir James Egan is displeased with you."

"Displeased—why?"

"Over this Lilla Gayton business. He says you have thrown away one of the best chances he ever had, and one that might have got our man off."

"I don't see——"

"You don't see? Surely, man, it's as plain as a pike-staff. You discover that Lilla Gayton prepared

the dinner neither for Sir Nicholas Brannock nor for Sir Rollo, and you go and tell her so ! "

" I had to find out who she had prepared it for."

" Why ? What did it matter whether it was a husband or a lover ? Think of the use Egan could have made of it. He considers the case may turn on her evidence. As I saw at the inquest, the point whether Sir Nicholas referred to another meeting is enormously important. If she swears there was to be another meeting then our man has an immediate reason for getting hold of poison. But if we can discredit her story the case is knocked sideways. Just imagine it—" and Querit jumped up from his chair as though for the moment he imagined he was the famous K.C.

" She has told her story and Egan asks her a few gentle questions and draws her on. He sympathises with her—she meant to be true to Rollo and she meant to break with the uncle and prepared a nice dinner to make it easy. She assents to this and he plays with her a little longer. Then he turns and rends her. She knows the dinner was not prepared for Sir Nicholas. There was another man ! Why has she lied to the court ? Who was the man ? Whatever her explanation, the girl is crushed, her evidence is wiped out, and it is one of the most dramatic episodes seen in court for many a long day. Sir James would have been superb, and it might have got Sir Rollo off. Now it is all wasted."

" We have got the truth," said Chester rather miserably.

" Good Lord, man ! What do we want with the truth ? We want to win the case ! Now you have put Miss Gayton on her guard. She will tell the

whole story in her examination and there is nothing to trip her over. Egan says you must dig into her past and find something else. There generally is something with such a woman."

"I don't think I am altogether to blame," said the detective. "I told Mr. Graham and he went with me. The thing was dealt with as he wished."

"Yes, yes," said Querit impatiently. "Mr. Graham means well enough, but what does he know about fighting criminal cases? Only two days ago he came here and brought Miss Joan Wedderburn with him. A charming girl, but she would harp on proving Sir Rollo innocent. I got quite annoyed. "My dear young lady," I said to her, "we do not have to prove Sir Rollo innocent. He *is* innocent till they prove him guilty, and we are entitled to take all steps possible to prevent them doing it."

"And that won't be any too easy," said the detective.

"It will be d——d difficult, especially if we throw away our chances. Someone poisoned Sir Nicholas, and if Sir Rollo did not, who the devil did? Of course, it is almost impossible for people to realise that their own folk are just as likely to do a thing like that as anyone else's folk. But some of his relations think he did it."

"I am not surprised," said the detective cynically. "Have they anything to go on?"

"Only the inquest story. It was his precious brother-in-law, Major Bennikin, who came here. He asked, if Sir Rollo was hanged—he did not put it quite so plainly—whether the estates would be shared between the two sisters, one of them being his wife. I told him we should get Sir Rollo off. He expressed

his delight and looked disgusted. Then I said as the estates were in strict male entail they would all pass to the other sister's boy—the Bennikins have no family. He urged us to do all we could for Sir Rollo. However, that is immaterial. Have you any fresh news ? "

" Very little. Mr. Graham suggested there was a big interval between 9.15 when Sir Nicholas left Miss Gayton's flat and ten o'clock when he reached Sir Rollo. I have been trying to find how he went from one place to the other and if he made any call *en route*. I have tackled most of the omnibus conductors who pull up just beyond Miss Gayton's flat. One fellow who is there about 9.15 in the evening thinks he remembers Sir Nicholas getting on his bus there and going to Piccadilly, but he cannot swear to it. I have also found a bookshop in Rupert Street —that is off Shaftesbury Avenue, just behind Piccadilly Circus—where Sir Nicholas sometimes went, but they cannot swear he was there that Saturday. Probably, however, that fills in the odd half-hour."

" That is all ? It does not help us. Now, Chester, you must concentrate on Lilla Gayton. But remember if you discover anything don't blurt it out to her, don't even tell Mr. Graham. Bring it straight to me."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BURGLARY

THERE is no doubt that to be a skilful burglar apprenticeship and training are necessary, just as they are in all the other professions. Of course a man must make a start sometime, but as the would-be surgeon does not lead off by exploring for an appendix, so probably there are easier things for a house-breaker to begin on than an attempt to raid a gentleman's country residence single-handed. He might graduate in area-sneaking or robbing deserted out-houses. He might attempt to enter the flat of a maiden lady, having first made sure that she had gone to a concert, a prayer meeting, or a bridge-party. It is a rash thing for a novitiate to plunge right away into the highest branches of the calling, to endeavour to burgle the house of a man who might be well armed and have his premises surrounded with traps and pitfalls, and guarded with bells that would ring out wildly if one went anywhere near them.

These were the thoughts that were running through Bruce Graham's mind as he guided his two-seater Sunbeam along the Datchet road, a little after midnight. He had been sorely tempted to take Ned Lamport with him. He did not doubt Ned's willing-

ness, but he knew if trouble came of it the Lard Lord would never forgive him. He had been tempted, too, to ask Ned for some hints. The special course of study to which he had lately been devoting himself should reveal the most up-to-date methods of cracking cribs and defying detection. Yet he had decided after all to do the job by himself. It was his matter, his and Joan's, and if it helped to clear up the mystery and to rescue Rollo he would not mind running a little risk. After all, it is the motive that matters. Had anyone ever had a higher motive for committing so excellent a crime ?

It was a fine night, and as he neared his destination the roads were practically deserted. His little car ran along almost noiselessly and he knew, if it ever came to be a question of speed, there were not many machines that could catch him.

He reached the Regis Road. There was not a soul about. He slackened his pace and soon came to some gates that bore on them the name of Dulver Dene. He ran a little further on and pulled up in a shady spot fifty yards from the gates. He got out and took from the bottom of the car an iron bar, eighteen inches long, sharpened at one end, as serviceable a jemmy as any gentleman of his calling could require. He also took another, rather smaller, and he tested for an instant the electric torch he had brought in his pocket. Then he attached to his motor-goggles a slip of black cloth that made a first-rate mask. So, equipped for his task, he slipped back to the gates of Dulver Dene.

The house was in perfect darkness. All the windows were closed and curtains were drawn across them.

Either Mr. Levy disliked the night air or else he slept at the back. The smaller gate was slightly ajar and made no sound as the intruder pushed it open. There was a grass edging to the gravel pathway. He trod on this so that his footsteps might not be heard by the lightest sleeper.

Quickly he reached the house and identified in the pale moonlight the right-hand room in which Joan had told him the desk resided. His entrance, however, was to be made at the back. The path divided. One portion formed the carriage sweep that led to the front door, the other continued past the house into the garden at the back. The grass strip ended, but flower beds succeeded it. Flowers are grown to give joy to man. Could these flowers ever serve a better purpose than in making his pathway peaceful?

He reached the back of the house and stood for a moment under the shadow of an elm tree to reconnoitre. Everything was still perfectly quiet. To add to his precautions he removed his shoes, and then in his silken socks, such as a gentleman Raffles should wear, he stepped noiselessly past a side door, past some windows, and came to a slight recess where he found the entrance to the passage that Joan had told him of. The grass was wet to his feet and the pebbles on the pathway were hard and sharp, but he was scarcely aware of them.

The sill was about four feet from the ground, and as Joan had said, the window was of leaded glass, being in small diamond panes about three inches across. The lead was not hard. With his knife, with great care, he loosened one pane. He passed the knife in above it and it fell back into his hand.

To remove two more with his fingers on the inside was easier. He then cut the lead and passing his arm through felt all round the frame of the lower sash. There were no wires or other suspicious attachments. Then he reached up and felt the sash fastener. This, too, seemed free from undesirable features, with the very slightest click it slipped back. He waited a moment and then pushed the sash gently up. A slight spring and he was astride the sill. No sounds came from the rooms above. His feet sank comfortably on to a soft rug inside Dulver Dene.

The moonlight hardly penetrated the house, and he stood for a few seconds to see if he could proceed without using his torch. As that seemed risky, he cast the ray cautiously along the passage. This, he saw, led to the central hall out of which opened the room he wanted, now of course, on his left.

His shoeless feet made no sound on the excellent carpet that Mr. Levy's prosperous business afforded him. A moment later his hand was grasping the door-knob of the room he was bound for. The door was locked, but the key was in the lock. It turned noiselessly, as a good lock should. Then he entered and closed the door.

The light of the torch ran quickly round the room but its choice furnishings did not interest him. There was the desk. A fine solid oak desk. He stood beside it. It was locked as he had expected. He paused for a moment. He could not work in the dark and this was a two-handed job. He returned to the door and switched on the lights. The first switch lit up a large centre light. The second switch lit up two brackets, one over a side table and one over

the desk. He turned off the centre light. The others would serve.

He went back to the desk and inserted his long jemmy above the top of the first drawer. He pressed it slowly down. It seemed almost a pity to spoil so fine a piece of wood.

" Hands up ! "

In his startled amazement he dropped his unaccustomed tool and looked round.

He saw he was covered with a big gun held by a small man with a very fierce pair of dark eyes.

" Vat are you doing here ? "

Poor Bruce ! He had heard no footsteps ; other shoeless feet could be as silent as his own on those thick carpets. He could have sworn he heard no alarm bells ring. No alarm bells had rung. Joe Levy's burglar alarm was more subtle than that. A step at night on the mats by his doors switched on an enormously powerful light suspended just over the head of his bed. That unfailingly awoke him and enabled him to seize his double-barrelled gun and face his unsuspecting visitor.

Bruce dropped his jemmy and raised his hands.

" A fair cop ! " he murmured, and he asked himself what he should do. Should he say boldly why he had come, and demand to see the brass-bound book with an explanation of the relationship between this man and the dead baronet ? Or should he pretend to be an ordinary burglar and trust to Joan and Inspector Porter to get him out of his mess ? If he demanded to see the book—how could he enforce his demand in the face of that gun ? And would it be wise to let Levy know it was wanted ? If it was true that this

man was in any way responsible for the death of Sir Nicholas, what chance would another man have who interfered with his secret and was so absolutely at his mercy ?

These thoughts flashed through his mind, and his captor repeated——

" Vat are you doing here ? "

" Burglin', Guv'nor," he said in a husky voice, " but I've never done it before. Swop me bob, I ain't."

" Sit in dat chair," said the man with the gun, still keeping it pointed at his chest. " Sit in dat chair, and take off your mask. I vant to see who you are."

There was nothing for it but to obey. He sat in the chair and he removed his goggles and the cloth he had attached to them. Who should he say he was ? What account of himself should he give ?

" I do not know you," said Levy, scrutinising him carefully. " Who are you and vy did you go to my desk ? "

Bruce was floored. He was not conscious of an exact feeling of fear, but he did not know how to get out of the mess in which he found himself. He had pictured the possibility of his being detected and having to bolt. He had realised that the bolt might be unsuccessful and he would be handed over to the police until such time as Joan and Inspector Porter could clear matters up ; but he had not foreseen an unpleasant cross-examination by the irate money-lender, with himself at the wrong end of what looked like an elephant rifle. The feeling that he had failed and had let his friends down was not agreeable. He

decided the only thing to do was to carry on as a disappointed burglar might.

"It's the fust time, guv'nor. Lemme go this once. I ain't got nothink."

Now Joe Levy, in addition to being no coward, was no fool. Before he handed his prisoner over to the police he wanted to know more about him.

"Take off dose gloves," he said curtly. Bruce was not sorry to lower his hands again to remove the gloves that he knew all good burglars wore to prevent leaving finger marks. He did for a moment consider whether he should roll to the floor and make a dash at Levy's legs, but decided it would be too risky. Levy was wise enough to keep at a fair distance.

"Hold your hands down each side of de chair."

Again he obeyed, and Mr. Levy eased the gun a bit. He put the butt under his arm but kept the muzzle pointing at his prisoner's chest. His fingers were still at the trigger.

"Vat is your name?"

"Spider," said Bruce, after a moment's thought.

"Ho, ho! Spider is it? Dat is good! Vy did you valk into my parlour, Mr. Spider?"

"It's my fust job, guv'nor. Lemme go this time."

"Ve vill understand each odder, Mr. Spider. You break into my house and I catch you. You try to talk like a common burglar, but your clothes are de clothes of a gentleman, and your hands are de hands of a gentleman. Vat is your explanation?"

Then Bruce realised his mistake. He had attempted the whining speech of a coster caught in crime. He had forgotten his silken socks, his trousers with the cut of Savile Row and his expensive leather jacket.

He had forgotten, too, his clean and well-kept hands. Of course a smart modern burglar might have all these things, but then a smart modern burglar would not have talked as he had talked. He had bungled his business, and Levy was too shrewd not to see it.

" You are right, sir," he said in his ordinary tone, " I am not a common burglar. If I were I might have managed better. I am hard up and I thought I would try my hand at it. I have made a mess and I apologise. What are you going to do with me ? "

" Yes, Mr. Spider, you made a mess all right, but you must tell me just vy you came here, and vy you vent for my desk. Dere are de ornaments, dere is silver. You do not touch dem. You go for my desk. Vy ? "

" Well, you know, sir," and Bruce tried to make his tone friendly, " silver and ornaments are difficult to sell, and the fellows cheat you so. In the desk there might have been cash. That is so much handier."

" Mr. Spider, I do not believe you. I am in no hurry, but I give you dree minutes to tell me de truth. Vy did you come here and vy did you go to my desk ? "

He did not speak angrily, but there was a nasty curl about his lips that suggested he meant what he said. He shifted his gun again to an easier position. Bruce wondered how long three minutes would last. Must he tell ?

" Be quick. De time is going. Do not tink I don't mean it. You are a burglar in my house. You attack me vid a jemmy and I shoot you in self-defence. No one blames me. Now, vy vas it ? "

Bruce still waited. Was it a bluff, or did he really mean what he said ? If he had killed Sir Nicholas

would he hesitate to take another life when everything was so easy for him ?

" Very vell. You do not tell me. I count ten and den I shoot."

He got up as he spoke and he raised the gun to his shoulder again, taking one step nearer to his victim.

" One, two, dree, four——"

" *Drop that gun or I fire !* "

The words came in a loud clear voice from the doorway. The startled man turned and beheld a sturdy figure behind him clad in motoring overalls with goggles and scarf, and covering him with a service revolver held in a steady hand.

" My God ! " he muttered, and as he said it he felt himself pushed to the floor, for Bruce Graham, seeing his chance, had leapt from the chair, seized the gun, and thrown himself and the man on to the carpet.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BRASS-BOUND BOOK

SELDOM in so short a time have the tables been so completely turned. By a miracle the big gun did not explode. Probably it wanted a good pull to fire it. Now it was in Bruce Graham's hands, and Joe Levy lay on the floor, his dressing gown and his flannel pyjamas all awry and exposing his hairy little legs. And the dominant third figure still stood, revolver in hand, in control of the situation.

"My God!" said the dazed money-lender once again. "Who are you?—vot do you vant?"

The revolver was lowered for a moment.

"Guard him," was the command to Bruce, and the new-comer stepped to the door, drew the key from the outer side and turned the lock from within.

"Now we can talk."

It took but a moment to remove the motor cap, the goggles and the scarf.

"Gracious Heaven! It is a voman!" cried the prostrate usurer.

"It is," replied Joan Wedderburn, as she walked across to his desk. His eyes followed her, and Bruce was almost as amazed. He had seized his

opportunity but he had not guessed the identity of his rescuer.

" Now we can talk," she repeated.

" Who are you, and vat in de devil do you mean by it ? " Joe Levy had pluck, and although the odds were against him, he would put up a fight for his home and his belongings.

"Won't you sit down ? " asked Bruce. " You offered me a seat. That chair is quite comfortable."

Without a word Levy got up and moved to the chair his captive had so recently vacated.

" Now ! " he said, looking boldly at the girl. She put her revolver on his desk and seated herself beside it.

" Now, Mr. Levy," she said, " we are friends of Sir Rollo Brannock and we want to know all about your business with Sir Nicholas—his uncle."

" And who told you I had any business vid Sir Nicholas, his uncle ? " He spoke defiantly. So this was what they had come about. He knew it was no common burglary. Perhaps a little cunning might yet make him master of the situation again.

" We are not going to discuss that," said Joan. " Sir Rollo, as you know, is accused of poisoning his uncle. Falsely accused. We have reason to believe you did it."

" And vat is your reason for believing I did it ? " He still spoke calmly, almost derisively.

" We know Sir Nicholas was with you in your office at Shaftesbury Avenue from nine-thirty to ten on that Saturday evening. The doctors say he was poisoned three hours before one o'clock."

" It is a lie ! It is a lie ! I did not do it ! He vas

not dere!" His confidence was shaken, and he had turned paler.

"It is not a lie, Mr. Levy. He was there. He made an appointment to call, and he was with you for half an hour."

"It is a damn' lie—you cannot prove it."

"Oh, yes, we can, and we are going to the police to-morrow. We thought we would give you a chance to tell us the truth first."

Her tone of quiet assurance was not without effect, and his busy brain was working to find a way of escape.

"Vat do you vant me to do?" he asked.

"We want you to show us that brass-bound book that records your transactions with Sir Nicholas."

So that was it! He had half feared it. That was why they were tampering with his desk. They must know something. At first another denial was on his lips. But perhaps there was a better way.

"It is in de desk," he said, rising. "I vill give it you."

The girl moved aside from his desk, but she left the revolver on it. That was his chance! He stepped forward and seized the weapon. He pointed it at Bruce who was across the room with the gun at his feet, and he kept the girl in his eye, too.

"Ha!" he cried, "now I fancy I control de business, Mr. Spider and lady burglar!"

"Not at all, Mr. Levy," she said. "The revolver is not loaded! Cover him, Bruce!"

With a cry of rage he snapped the trigger, but the empty click showed her words were true. And he

was faced with the ugly barrels of his own gun that he knew were not empty.

"Now," said the girl, "we will have that book. The key please."

"It is upstairs," he said sullenly. "I vill fetch it for you."

"I think not! It would be a pity to disturb your servants. Bruce, just open the drawer will you? I will hold the gun."

A wrench of the jemmy tore the lock off the drawer.

"Can you get the book now?" asked Bruce. "Or shall I open up a bit more?"

Muttering a curse, the money-lender pulled the drawer out and passed his trembling hands inside the space it had left. He touched a concealed spring. A panel within slid back, and he took from a shallow recess the little brass-bound volume they were seeking.

"Dere it is," he said, "de honest record of an honest man, taken by force, blast you!"

Without replying, Bruce put his foot on it, and inserting his weapon under its little lock, wrenched it off. The usurer watched in silence. Then in a quiet tone, he said:

"I vill tell you everyting."

"Good," said Joan. "Shall we sit down?"

He returned to his chair. She sat opposite to him, and Bruce having taken the gun, opened the breach and removed the two cartridges.

"Now," he said, "we can all trust one another. And I have still got my jemmy."

There was silence for a few moments. It was a queer scene, the money-lender in his dressing-gown,

the girl looking like a man in her loose waterproof trousers, and Bruce in his wet silk socks, with the little book on his knee. All sitting quietly in easy chairs, the revolver on the broken desk, and the gun on the floor. Each tensely watching the others.

Then the money-lender spoke, and his first words were remarkable.

"You may say dere vas no such person as Joe Levy. It vas all Sir Nicholas Brannock."

They looked their question at him. What did he mean?

"Joe Levy was a clerk, a manager," he explained with a wave of his hands. "De whole business was Sir Nicholas Brannock. He owned everything, he lent de money. Joe Levy did de work. It is all in dat little book."

"I thought money-lenders had to be registered?" said Bruce.

"Yes. So Joe Levy is registered but he lends Sir Nicholas's money, and Sir Nicholas takes de profits!"

"And was it Sir Nicholas who hounded poor Lord John Randall to his death?" asked Joan.

"Sir Nicholas gave orders. Dey vere obeyed."

"The devil! He deserved to be poisoned!"

"I did not poison him," said Levy with a shrug. "It is true Sir Nicholas came to my office, but he did not eat or drink wid me. He vas too fine a gentleman." There was a touch of bitterness in his tone.

"If Sir Nicholas met no harm in your office why did you deny that he called there?"

"Deny—Ah! You know Miss Myrtle Turner?

No matter, it is quite simple. When Sir Nicholas died everyone thought it vas heart failure. Vy tell de vorld he called on me? Vy say he vas really Joe Levy? Ven de inquest vas over den vould be time enough to tell his family."

"But you did not tell them?"

"No. I vaited. De inquest vas adjourned. Den dey say he vas poisoned, but dey know all his movements, so vy vorry dem vid the little time he spent vid me—and bring myself into de trouble?"

"But you could not keep his money," Bruce pointed out. "You would have to render an account to his estate."

"Yes. I have written to his estate dat I had moneys of his and am preparing accounts. So time goes on; dey are in no hurry."

"Meanwhile Sir Rollo lies in prison," cried Joan indignantly, "and the trial comes on so soon!"

"I cannot help dat, young lady. I did not poison Sir Nicholas. If Sir Rollo did not, I hope he gets off."

"Sir Rollo owed you money?" asked Bruce.

"Or owed it to his uncle," said the man with a grin. He seemed to feel easier now that matters were explained.

Bruce and Joan looked at one another. Their business was finished. It had led to a remarkable revelation, but did it help them? They had cleared up the mystery of the odd half-hour in the time-table, but if Levy's story was true, had they achieved anything else—anything to help Rollo? Was it true?

"I shall take this book," said Bruce, "and give

it to Inspector Porter. I shall tell him all you have told us. Why he has heard nothing of it before is for you to explain. It is also for you to show that Sir Nicholas met no harm on his call on you."

"Vy should I harm Sir Nicholas?" asked the little man? "I made big profits for him and he paid me vell. Now de money goes back to his estate and I get nothing. Joe Levy must shut up. The death of Sir Nicholas is a great loss to me."

"That," said Bruce, "is for other people to go into. I don't think there is anything gained by our discussing it. We will get along. We are sorry we disturbed your night's rest, but we did not mean to!"

CHAPTER XX

DISAPPOINTMENT

IT was late next morning when Joan awoke. Usually she rose early and had a walk, a ride, or, when circumstances permitted, a swim before breakfast. This day she lay on her bed and felt little inclination to get up. It was not merely that it had been nearing dawn before she reached her home. That was not altogether an unprecedented thing in these days of late dances. It was rather that she was disheartened and wished to think things out all over again.

She lay there, her slim, straight figure faintly outlined by the light coverings. Her hands were clasped behind her head, and her short, golden hair with its tinge of bright red rust was bushed on the pillow. Her firm little lips were pressed closely together and, under the straight, well marked line of her brows, her large grey eyes were gazing wide-opened at the furthest corner of the room. But they did not see that room at all. They were looking along the road she had sped the night before and at the scenes in which she had taken a part. Then these scenes would fade, and she would be looking at a solitary figure, confined in lonely quarters, awaiting

the fast approaching day when he was to be tried for his life.

She was despondent. She had gone out the night before full of the hope that the mystery that hung over them was to be dispelled. Now the mystery seemed as dark and inscrutable as ever.

Her mind recalled her restless waiting after Bruce Graham had gone forth on his quest. Her sudden fear that danger might befall him, and her determination to catch him up and stay his lawless enterprise. They would tell Inspector Porter all they knew, and he must force the truth from Joe Levy's unwilling lips.

So, leaving the house when everyone else had gone to rest, she had set forth on her motor-bicycle in the endeavour to overtake her cousin in his little car. By an odd chance she had picked up a revolver belonging to her father and had slipped it into her pocket.

She had flown through the deserted highways, but she had hesitated too long. Arrived at Dulver Dene, there had been the horrible sensation of seeing the friend she had persuaded to undertake the dangerous mission in such peril. Peeping through a chink between the curtains of the front room, she had seen her cousin sitting in that chair, with Joe Levy facing him, pointing the big gun at his heart.

With her own heart pounding furiously she had rushed to the back window and scrambled in as she bade him do. In a loud voice that seemed to her to belong to someone else she had ordered Joe Levy to drop his gun, while she covered him

with her revolver. They had reduced him to impotence, they had captured the brass-bound book, they had heard the amazing story of Sir Nicholas Brannock's sordid traffic through the agency of his well paid hireling—but what was the good of it all, how did it help the man they were trying to save ?

Levy's story sounded true. That he was really only a nominee in these money-lending schemes was proved by the secret record they had taken from him. And, as he himself had said, what would it profit him to lose the employer who paid so well for the use of his name ?

At the end of their conversation, Levy's natural resentment at their unlawful intrusion had largely disappeared. He had even offered to get them cake and wine before they started their homeward journey. An offer they had thought it prudent to decline. Bruce had given him his card and had promised to pay for making good the damage to the desk. They had parted almost as friends, Levy with gentle irony regretting he could not put them up for the night.

Then the homeward way, silent and disappointed. Bruce had managed to strap her cycle on to the back of his car, and so they had returned together, speaking hardly a word.

Once again their efforts had failed. Their efforts were a series of failures. Truly they had tried. Strange things had been revealed, things that at first seemed likely to alter the complexion of the whole matter. Yet, what had they really accomplished ? There had been the queer story of

Lilla Gayton's dinner and the discovery of her semi-detached husband. Then the clue of the missing half-hour, the call of Sir Nicholas on his underling, and the news that he himself was really the notorious usurer. All remarkable things, yet none of them showing who had in fact committed the crime of which Rollo was accused. Ned Lamport's fantastic methods were after all as good as theirs.

The girl sighed, she almost sobbed, as she realised their failure. That damning chain of evidence against the man who had been her lover—they had worked all this time and no single link in it seemed weakened. The quarrel at Lilla Gayton's flat, the parting, the call at the place where the poison was kept, the supper, the interval while the telephone was used—not one detail could they question or dispute. They had further proof that Sir Nicholas was a man who cloaked his evil living under the guise of philanthropy—would that help them? If they proved that Rollo owed him money, instead of owing it to someone else, would that persuade a jury of his innocence? Might it not even make things worse? Must it after all be that there was nothing to rely on but the skill of Sir James Egan and the hope that he could create some form of uncertainty in the jurors' minds? Poor, generous, impulsive Rollo! Must he go through life with a cloud, a doubt, for ever hanging over him?

"May I come in?"

The door opened a little way and Auntie Angela's nose was just visible through the aperture.

"Yes," was the reply.

The elder lady entered and stood for a moment in silence at the bedside.

" You are looking pale, my dear," she said. " Are you unwell ? "

" I am all right," answered the girl.

" Were you not out very late last night ? " The question was asked hesitatingly, and there was no reply.

" I don't want to be unkind, Joan, but for a young girl to leave home after everyone else has gone to bed, and not to return for several hours, is really very wrong." She paused, but still there was no answer. " I lay awake all the time listening for you. And it has happened before. I feel it is my duty to tell your father, but I know it will upset him."

" Oh ! why will she not go and let me think it all out again ? I am fighting for Rollo, and they want to fuss about latch-keys ! " so cried the girl in her heart. Aloud she said :

" I do not think it will happen again."

" I hope not, dear. I know things are different to what they used to be. But I must do my duty, and girls must be careful."

Again there was no reply, and Auntie Angela drew a little nearer. She said more softly :

" Are you—are you unhappy, Joan ? "

The girl turned her head away, and murmured :

" If you will go I think I will get up."

" Cannot you tell me, dear ? Perhaps I could help ? "

To the young it often seems impossible that their elders can really understand their troubles. Perhaps

that thought was in Joan's mind. She glanced at her Aunt's face and saw two tears trickling down her cheeks. Her resentment vanished.

"It is just Rollo," she whispered. "We thought we had a clue."

"And hadn't you?" Auntie Angela asked the question rather vaguely, wondering whether it was finger-marks or footprints her niece had been searching for.

"Oh, Auntie Ange! I know I have been a beast to you, but it seems so hopeless. We have tried everything and thought of everyone. I have seen Gabriel Jowlett, but we are no nearer the truth, and the time is getting shorter and shorter." She held up her head and her aunt threw her arms round her and let her tears run freely over the girl's sweet cheeks and down her soft neck.

"I wonder why Sir Nicholas went to see Gabriel Jowlett?" Auntie Angela gulped a bit as she said it, and blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

"When did Sir Nicholas see Gabriel Jowlett?" Joan was alert at once, and looked eagerly at her aunt.

"On that Saturday night, dear."

"Sir Nicholas saw Gabriel Jowlett that night? How do you know?"

"I don't know he did, but when I was coming home I passed along Pont Street and saw Sir Nicholas standing at Mr. Jowlett's door."

"This may be frightfully important," said the girl, and she jumped out of her bed, threw a dressing-gown loosely over her shoulders, and dashed

hastily out of the room without waiting to put on her slippers. She ran to her den and seized the scrap of paper that contained the time-table of the fatal evening.

"What time was it?" she asked, when she returned.

"I cannot say exactly. I was returning for dinner. It must have been a little after seven."

"At seven o'clock Sir Nicholas left home," said Joan, consulting her paper. "At five past seven he called here. He arrived at his club at half-past. From here to Pont Street is about three minutes' walk. If he took a cab from there to his club it would leave him a quarter of an hour with Gabriel Jowlett! Why did you never mention it before?"

"I don't know, dear. You see, I did not speak to Sir Nicholas. I only passed him in the street. I did not think it mattered. I never read much of the case myself."

"It may make all the difference. I must telephone Bruce."

Putting on her dressing-gown in a more orthodox manner, and thrusting her feet into her little silken slippers, she ran down to the room where the telephone was and soon got through to her cousin.

"By Jove! Joan," he said, when she had told him her news, "perhaps this is the clue we have been waiting for! I don't think we will work it ourselves this time. We are not lucky. I will put Inspector Porter on to it. I was just off to see him with Levy's little account book, so I will tell him this too."

"Let me know what he says," urged Joan, and they rang off.

All that day she waited for the further news. Her heart felt happier as she realised there was still a chance of a fresh light on the mystery. She asked herself, as Auntie Angela had asked, why did Sir Nicholas go to see Gabriel Jowlett? She had never heard Mrs. Raeton speak of the dead baronet as one of Jowlett's flock. For what purpose had he called at Pont Street? And what had happened while he was there? Did Gabriel Jowlett, who had appeared to have that queer vision when she called on him—did he really know all about the crime? Jowlett had said the truth would come through a woman. Had he been unconsciously right? Was Auntie Angela to be the means of their solving the mystery?

The hope, vague and indefinite as it was, buoyed her up during the day. It was evening before Bruce came and she saw at once that another disappointment had befallen them.

"It's a wash-out, old girl," he said. "Inspector Porter knew all about the call at Pont Street. Gabriel Jowlett told him of it on the day the inquest opened. Sir Nicholas did call, but Jowlett had left for the week-end the night before. The servant told him that, and Sir Nicholas went away. He was only there half a minute and it was not worth mentioning. Porter says he was leaving nothing to chance and he saw the servant and also saw the hotel people where Jowlett stayed. So that's that!"

"Anything else?" asked Joan, hopelessly.

"Not much. Joe Levy had been there before I

arrived and had told his story and given his explanations. Porter seems inclined to believe him. I left the book with him and he is going to test the tale in every way he can, but he apparently thinks it is true."

Joan went to bed early that night, early enough to satisfy the most Victorian of aunts. But she did not sleep. For hours she lay with her eyes wide open and she repeated the prayer that the lawyers told her was foolish and unnecessary.

" O God, grant that we may prove him innocent!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BUTLER'S SECRET

BRUCE GRAHAM was studying a financial newspaper. There is a curious kind of madness about dealings on the Stock Exchange. A man who is shrewd and careful in his ordinary business affairs will suddenly cast all caution to the wind when a friend whispers to him: "Do you want to make a bit? If so, buy Ballyloonies!" He bethinks him of a small fund he has available. How splendid if he could double it! His usual reply to such a question is: "What are they?" By which, he does not mean to inquire whether he is to deal in mining shares, oils, rubbers, or in some concern, perhaps a Railway, known to intimates by the pet name of Ballyloonies as "Berthas" and "Doras" are. No; that is of no consequence at all. He means what is their price, how many can I get? The tempter replies: "They are ten shillings to-day, but they are going to twenty. They went up a bob yesterday." So an order is despatched in haste, and a parcel of Ballyloonies is put with the Little Maries and the Rocky Reefs to wait for that wonderful day when the Bulls will be caught napping, or the

Bears will be squeezed, and the deserving will be rewarded.

Bruce Graham possessed that very human fondness for a flutter, and like most people he put money into concerns he knew nothing whatever about. Also like most people he had the sorry pleasure of seeing his companies "quoted" day by day, but generally at a lower figure than they were the week before. Still, as he remarked, it always gave one something to look for in the papers.

He had not had much time to study what he sometimes called his insecurities while he had been working for his friend Rollo, but this morning he was going through the list, without deriving much satisfaction from it, when his neighbour, Ned Lamport, burst in excitedly upon him.

"Spider," he cried, "at last I am on the track."

"Whose track, Ned?"

"The track of the fellow who poisoned old Nicholas Brannock, of course!"

"You mean Lord Liverdale?"

"No, I have still got an eye on him, but I don't think he is the man. As a matter of fact I have seen his son, and he is not standing for Parliament."

"Then it is that waiter at the Critz?"

"No—it is Marsh, the butler. I am surprised you never suspected him, Spider—though it was only chance that put me on the trail."

"Not old Marsh? I own I never suspected him. I've known him for years and he is so formidably respectable that I'm rather afraid of him. If he committed a murder I am sure he would do it with a

mixture of deference and condescension that no one could take exception to."

"That may all be assumed."

"True, though not many could assume it. Tell me the worst."

"It was like this. I was walking down Sloane Street one day—or rather one night, when I saw a fellow I seemed to know. He crossed the square in front of me and went into a little tobacconists shop in a side street, where they also sell papers and sweets and such things. As he went in I saw it was Marsh, the Brannocks' butler. Well, I'm keeping a wary eye for anyone connected with that case, so I waited to see him come out. When he did, he had altered his appearance—at least he had pulled his hat over his eyes and turned his collar up so that you would hardly recognise him. Then he walked quickly down a mews close by."

"And you followed?"

"Naturally I wondered what he was up to. Should I follow him, I asked myself, or should I make inquiries at the shop? I decided to go to the shop first. So I went in and bought an evening paper and turned over some rather fly-blown novels to ingratiate myself with the woman in charge. I selected a couple and while I was looking for a third, I said:

"'Who was the man I passed as I came in? I thought I knew his face.'

"'He is one of my regular customers,' said the woman.

"'Do you know what he is, or what his name is?' I asked.

" ' No,' she said, ' he comes here every Wednesday and Saturday regular. Very nice he is, but a bit stand-offish perhaps.'

" ' Not *every* Wednesday and Saturday,' I said.

" ' Oh, yes,' she said, ' always. I should quite miss him if he did not come ! '

" ' Do you really mean,' I said, ' he has been every Wednesday and every Saturday for the last four weeks ? '

" ' Yes—why not ? ' she asked. ' He was away in August and told me he had been on holiday.'

" That set me thinking, Spider. If he was out on Saturday the nineteenth, he might have followed Sir Nicholas or met him somewhere. The story of answering the telephone might all be a fake to prove an alibi if he was really somewhere else. What do you think about it ? "

" Not much, Ned. I suppose butlers have their nights out, and perhaps his are Wednesdays and Saturdays. If Sir Nicholas was to be back at ten-thirty no doubt Marsh would be in again before then."

" He did not say at the inquest he had been out."

" He said he spoke to Sir Nicholas at seven and again over the telephone at half-past ten. I don't think your discovery discredits that."

" Then why did he pull his hat over his face ? "

" Why shouldn't he ? Perhaps it was windy."

" Not a bit. But that is not all. It made me watch him. I kept out of his way, but on the Wednesday and the Saturday following he went from Cadogan Square to that shop, and each time on coming out he looked round and then turned his collar up and pulled

his hat down. Then he went along that mews and disappeared into a side door leading to the rooms above a garage. What do you make of that ? Why does he go there and whom does he meet ? " Lamport asked his questions in some triumph, and certainly it was not easy to answer them.

" I suppose a butler may have friends in a garage," said Bruce, " unless you are suggesting he, like his master, had a secret love affair."

" Not a love affair, Spider. There is another man in it. A shifty horsey-looking man. I have seen him hanging about Cadogan Square and sometimes have a few words with Marsh in the area. I have had to disguise myself once or twice, or they might have noticed me. Yesterday morning they spoke at the front door, and I heard Marsh say, ' I will be there to-morrow.' "

" That is to-day, Wednesday. What are you going to do about it ? "

" I am going to investigate," said Ned, " and I want you to come with me. I have got the keys of the next garage as it is empty, and I have had a ladder put in it. To-night I mean to put that ladder up against their window and look in and see what they are doing. Perhaps I shall be able to hear what they are saying. There are two rooms, and if the windows are open, as they generally are, I might get into the second room and so be able to listen better."

" You are a bold fellow, Ned. Where do I come in ? "

" I thought you would be with the ladder, and give the alarm if anyone came along ; and you might lend a hand if there is a rough and tumble."

Bruce Graham was not altogether impressed by his friend's discoveries and the theories he seemed to base on them, but no chance must be overlooked. If Marsh was engaged in any pursuit of a questionable character it might lead to something. As he had said, he had known the butler for years and had regarded him as a pillar of domestic rectitude, perhaps a trifle too impressed with the dignity of his position, but certainly not given to secret vices. Still, human nature is human nature and surprises are always awaiting us.

"All right, Ned, I'll come with you, although somehow I cannot quite picture old Marsh as the villain of the piece."

So that evening just as it was getting dark, the two friends waited at the top of Holbein Place, which is the street out of Sloane Square that contained the shop the butler so regularly patronised. Bruce glanced into its window and saw a number of newspapers, a few novels of apparently a very sentimental character, a quantity of highly coloured sweetstuffs, and some brands of the lesser expensive cigarettes and tobaccos. He wondered which of the various assortment it was that tempted Marsh so regularly and so unfailingly.

"Here he is!" whispered Ned fiercely. So the two sauntered across the road to leave the coast clear for the reliable customer.

Marsh walked along with his usual dignity. He was neatly dressed in a dark suit and his portly figure might well have been that of a member of the upper house of the legislature. Butlers often accumulate distinction from the various notable people they

meet and serve, and in time acquire a manner that surpasses any one of them. He entered the shop and then, curiously enough, as he quitted it with his purchases, he glanced round as if to see if he was observed. Then he pulled his hat well over his face and turned up his collar till it nearly met the slouching brim.

He crossed the road and entered the quiet mews. About half-way down he paused and apparently admitted himself through the side door Ned Lamport had noticed. Possibly he found it unfastened.

The two friends followed at a distance but did not immediately take any further action. They walked backwards and forwards for some while.

"Give them time to settle down," whispered Ned. This they did, and when half an hour had passed Ned produced his key for the adjoining garage, and as silently as possible they drew out their ladder and placed it just below the open window through which a light was shining, although it was partially curtained.

"You take first peep," said Ned softly. Bruce stepped quickly up, and watched and listened for two or three minutes.

"Now you have a look," he said when he came down. Ned ascended as nimbly but did not wait so long. He came down and without a word the two men removed their ladder and locked it up again.

"It will teach us," said Bruce as they walked quietly away. "It will teach us that the haughty butler, of whom you and I are considerably in awe, may in his private life be a god-father or a great-uncle—like

anyone else, and a great fool where a tryant of four years old is concerned."

For through that window they had seen the haughty Marsh crawling on the floor in his shirt sleeves, while a curly-headed child sat on his back and waved in its hand a large and vividly coloured sugar-stick. And the parents, the horsey man and his wife, looked on approvingly.

So another trail had ended in a blind alley.

CHAPTER XXII

THREE QUESTIONS

JOAN was determined on one thing. She must see Rollo in his prison before the trial commenced. Whatever his feelings towards her might now be, she wanted him to know when he faced his terrible ordeal that she, for one, had unswerving faith in his innocence.

She told Bruce of this determination, and she asked him to arrange the matter for her. She knew her cousin had seen Rollo three or four times and she knew his solicitor was, as was only right, allowed to consult him continually on the details of the defence. She did not know how other parties arranged interviews, but she begged Bruce to tell Rollo she was coming if he would let her, and then application would be made in the proper way.

"I have seen Rollo," her cousin told her a little later. "At first he insisted that you must not go, although he was very touched at your offer. It is rather awful for a man to be visited by a girl in such circumstances, but when I said you really wished to come, he agreed. I think, my dear, he is counting the hours till he sees you, counting them perhaps with a mixture of joy and pain. The best thing is for you

to speak to that magistrate pal of yours. Don't tell him of your own efforts at burgling, it may prejudice him, but get him to try and fix it up for you with the Governor of the prison. He is sure to know him and it will make things easier."

Joan realised that this was good advice. She went round that same evening to see Mr. Markington, who was a friend of her father's and had known her since she was a baby. He was a kindly man with a ruddy complexion and clear eyes. Every moment he could spare from his judicial duties he spent in outdoor sports, and that kept him healthy in body and alert in mind. His court was in a very populous district in South-East London. Probably his knowledge of law was not very profound, but his knowledge of human nature was.

That much applauded judgment of King Solomon's was not good law. His decision to bisect the baby would not have been upheld in any court of appeal—had there been one—but he understood the people he had to deal with. In like manner Mr. Markington grappled with the many problems that confronted him from day to day in a broad human way, and he seldom failed to do substantial justice.

He heard Joan's story sympathetically, and then he said :

"So you broke off your engagement with Sir Rollo Brannock, but you are still in love with him ? "

" I am," said the girl, flushing.

" Now, Joan, are you *sure* you love him ? You probably had good reasons for ending the engagement. Are you sure it is not only a reaction of sympathy in his trouble ? "

"I am sure," said the girl in a low tone. "I was unjust to him and I want to tell him so myself."

"Then I will do my best for you," said the magistrate. "I am afraid he has a very anxious time before him, but for your sake I hope it will end happily. I do not know much of the case, except, of course, what was in the papers, and no one should form an opinion from that. I will speak to Colonel Kennardy, who is the governor of the prison, and I will let you know what can be done."

So it happened that two days later Joan found herself driving across London to that grim building in which Sir Rollo was incarcerated. She had not told her own people of her intention until the very last minute. Then she informed her father of what she was proposing to do.

"And Daddy," she said as she finished, "you do believe he is innocent, don't you?"

Her father was for a moment silent. Then he put his two hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

"God knows if he is innocent, my child. If he is innocent God will set him free." His faith was supreme even in the darkest hour of trouble.

Colonel Kennardy, the Governor of the prison, proved to be a less formidable person than his important office led Joan to expect. He shook hands with her and said he had talked the matter over with Mr. Markington. She would be able to see Sir Rollo in a few minutes, and she might be with him for a quarter of an hour. He explained to her the rules and regulations governing these interviews, which were framed with the object of preventing any illicit thing being brought to those who were awaiting trial.

" Have I to be searched ? " asked the girl.

" No," he said smiling. " You are not searched, but someone else has to be in the room."

" I would gladly be searched," she said, " if I might spend a few minutes alone with him."

" I am afraid that is impossible," he said. Then he added with a kindly twinkle in his eye. " I shall be there myself, but my hearing is not as good as it used to be."

To those awaiting trial, the long period of confinement is a wearing and wearying one. Whether innocent or guilty there is the shame of their position and the uncertainty of the outcome of the ordeal that lies ahead of them. When the charge is one of murder the agony is intensified. To one like Rollo Brannock, used to much open air and exercise, to golf, motoring and hunting, the imprisonment alone would have a marked effect, for the so-called exercise permitted to untried prisoners is a very sorry substitute for the freedom they have lost. That, however, is but a trifle compared to the mental anguish that must be suffered each long day and endured each sleepless night—and the inevitable fear that those days and nights are all that remain of life's short span.

A warder unfastened the door and remained on guard outside. Colonel Kennardy led the way into the room, and Joan was shocked at the change those few weeks had wrought in her former lover. His eye had lost its brightness and there was a touch of grey in the hair by his temples. But there was no doubt of his joy in seeing her. They clasped hands, and in their grip there was something that spoke more eloquently than words. Tears came to Joan's eyes

and she stood for a moment without speaking. Colonel Kennardy turned away and studied a map that was hanging on the wall.

"Bruce has told me all that you have done," said Rollo at last. "How can I thank you?"

"We have done nothing," said the girl. "We tried—but we failed."

Again there was silence. There was so much to say, so little time to say it in, and yet it was so hard to put it into words. Joan's eyes looked round the barely furnished room with its high barred windows. How could she tell him what was in her heart? Before she came she had thought of words, words of comfort and hope. Words that would tell of her absolute trust in him. Now they were all gone. The last time she had spoken to him they had parted in anger. That was but a few weeks ago. Since then what terrible things had happened that they should meet again like this? It seemed as though a cloud had come over her, and she did not know what to say. Then suddenly there was a great light. Between herself and Rollo these things did not count. There was one thing that mattered.

"I want to ask you something," she said.

"What is it?"

"Do you love Lilla Gayton?"

"Before God, Joan, I do not. I never did. I was mad."

"Do you love me?"

"I love you, Joan, with every fibre of my soul."

"Will you marry me—directly you are free?"

"Joan!"

They had forgotten they were not alone, and they

were strained heart to heart in an embrace that seemed to wipe out the memory of all bitterness and misunderstanding. Colonel Kennardy gave a half quizzical glance in their direction. This was hardly within the regulations, and perhaps he had done his hearing some injustice. He coughed gently and moved a little further away.

"Then, Rollo," said the girl, with a new brightness in her eye as he released her, "to-morrow I will put the notice in the papers that our engagement is renewed!"

"No, my darling, no! You must not do that till it is all over."

"But I must! The world can say and think what it likes, but at least it will see that I, who know you best, am not afraid."

"No, Joan. I must forbid that. Your trust is everything to me, but I will not let you join your name to mine till that name is free from dishonour. Promise me that."

"But, Rollo, I want the world to know——"

"Promise me, Joan. Otherwise the agony while this doubt lasts would be more than I could bear."

So she promised as he wished, and for another precious moment they did not speak.

"Oh, Rollo," she whispered, "if only you had told me of your invention all this would never have happened."

"I know, my darling, I know; and yet the invention might even now be a failure. Bruce tells me those other people are having it tested. It still remains to be seen if it will stand the test of real use."

"Who were those other people?"

"One was an engineer called Freeth, and the other was a man called Gabriel Jowlett."

"Gabriel Jowlett!"

"Yes—do you know him?"

"No—yes—his name keeps coming into things——"

There was another cough, and a voice said:

"One more minute."

That minute passed quickly. Another embrace that the custodian of the prison could not grudge them. A whisper of love and of encouragement. A last wave of the hand, and the door closed again, the lock was turned, and the captive was left in his solitude. But the room was bright for many an hour with the wonderful presence that had been there, with the message of comfort and trust that had been brought.

CHAPTER XXIII

IF WE HAD MORE TIME!

VERY few days passed without Bruce Graham meeting his cousin Joan to compare notes and to see what progress, if any, had been made in the task they had set themselves of proving Rollo's innocence. Unfortunately the days went rapidly by and their task seemed no nearer achievement. Bruce was not surprised when on the evening after her call at the prison Joan telephoned for him to come round to see her.

He went at once and he noted an excitement in her manner and a new brightness in her eye. Without a word she held up her left hand for him to see. There, on the third finger where once two large diamonds had sparkled, was a plain gold signet-ring. It was rather loose, but she regarded it proudly.

"It is all on again!" she said, her cheeks glowing and her eyes sparkling. "I proposed to him like a brazen hussy and I made him give me this."

Bruce kissed her with a cousinly kiss and said how delighted he was. Then she told of her wish that the engagement should be announced immediately in all the papers, and how she had reluctantly yielded to

Rollo's persuasions not to publish the news till after the trial.

For a few minutes they discussed the matter in a happy world of make-believe as though the engagement had cleared away all troubles. Then once again they faced the situation as it really was.

"I think Rollo was right in not wishing the engagement announced," said Bruce, "in fact I almost doubt if the newspapers would have published it. Contempt of court is a queer thing. It might almost be argued that it was an attempt to influence the jury by appealing to their sympathy and sentiment. I understand your wish, my dear—a brave, sweet wish. But I also understand Rollo."

"I understand Rollo, too," said the girl in a low voice, "but it is horrible that he should have to think of things like that. Anyway, we *are* engaged and I have the right to do all I can." She paused for a moment ; then she added :

"It was not really that that I wanted to see you about—at least, not only that. Rollo told me that his patents had been anticipated by Gabriel Jowlett and a man called Freeth. Sir Nicholas knew Gabriel Jowlett, who is not an engineer at all. Does not that strike you as queer ? "

"It is queer in one way, but I am afraid it often happens that when people go to patent some new idea they find other folk have been working on the same lines and have anticipated them."

"Yes, but this is rather different. Here there is a connecting link between these two parties. Their ideas, too, are not merely similar but so remarkably identical as to be, in Rollo's word to you, uncanny."

"It is curious, but do we know that Sir Nicholas was aware of what Rollo was doing?"

Joan did not immediately reply. She was trying to puzzle the thing out, but it was not easy. They had discovered queer things before that had not helped them. Could there be in this nothing but coincidence, or was it really a part of the big mystery they were striving to solve?

"Sir Nicholas must have known," she said. "Myrtle Turner knew, for Rollo had told Joe Levy why he was borrowing the money. If Levy knew he would surely have told Sir Nicholas. So two lots of people, both in touch with Sir Nicholas, were working on the same thing and producing it in identical form. I wish Rollo's friend, Mr. Peterson, had not left England. He might be able to help us."

"What is your idea, Joan? Do you suggest Sir Nicholas got hold of Rollo's plans and gave them to Jowlett and his friend? Even if that were so, how would it help us to find who poisoned Sir Nicholas? I cannot quite see the connection between the two things."

"Nor can I—yet. But they may be connected. Suppose we leave the poisoning out of it for the moment. Is there anything fishy about the plans? Do you know the man Freeth?"

"No. Rollo said he was an engineer. I had never heard of him before."

"Rollo told me you said the couplings were being tested. How did you know that?"

"Sir Henry Whitelaw is a sort of distant connection of mine and a very good friend. He is a Director of

the North Central Railway, and is having the tests made. He told me."

"Suppose we saw him and asked how these people brought their plans, and if he thought it was all square?"

"I expect he will see us all right; but, honestly, Joan, I don't quite follow how it will help us. Why should Sir Nicholas rob Rollo of his ideas and give them to Jowlett and Freeth?"

"Sir Nicholas never loved Rollo. That is clear. He knew Rollo was hard up and was borrowing money and he never offered to help him—till he thought it necessary to buy his silence about Lilla Gayton. Sir Nicholas was a rank bad lot, up to any devilment. A fellow who would use a money-lender to skin his friends would not hesitate to plunder a nephew. Perhaps he would do it out of spite. If he stole Rollo's plans he could not work them himself, but he might use someone else, just as he used Joe Levy for his cursed usury."

Bruce looked at her in silence for some moments. A few weeks ago he would have laughed at the folly of such a suggestion, but after what they had discovered about the dead baronet, who could say that her quick brain might not have detected another of his underhand dealings? Anyway, no harm could come of their investigating the matter a little further. He offered to telephone Sir Henry Whitelaw and ask if he would see them the next day.

He went to the telephone and soon came back smiling.

"It's all right, Joan, the old boy will see us at twelve to-morrow. He is rather interested in the

little I told him, and if you come with me he'll do all you want. He's a good sort, but a bit of a rip in his way, and a pretty girl can do anything with him."

"I'll be as sweet as I know how if he'll do all he can, and do it quick," said Joan.

Punctually at noon the next day they attended at the director's office. Bruce introduced his cousin, and apparently she reached Sir Henry's standard in the matter of good looks, for he became fatherly almost immediately.

"My dear young lady," he said, as he took her little hand in one of his large ones and patted it with the other. "I am afraid you are going to be disappointed."

"In what way?" asked Joan, not unused to disappointment.

"About the automatic couplings. I have just had our man's report. He says the principle is good and might be useful in slow moving light traffic, but it will not stand the strain of heavy wagons rushing along at sixty miles an hour."

"That's a good job," said Joan.

"A good job? I thought you wanted the thing to be a success."

"Not if the plans were stolen," and she proceeded to tell him her suspicions, and she told him, too, the truth about Sir Nicholas and the money-lender, a thing not yet known to the public, although sure to come out at the trial.

"Well, well, this is very strange," he said, "almost incredible. Of course it is not uncommon for two people to produce a similar design. The patent office could record millions of such cases; but there is

always difference in detail. And you are engaged to Sir Rollo, are you ? "

" I am," said the girl.

" Yes, yes, I wish I had Sir Rollo's drawings and specifications. But perhaps I can help you. Let me think."

He walked up and down his room for a minute or two while Joan and Bruce waited in silence.

" Yes, yes. Perhaps that will do," and he left the room.

" He evidently thinks there is something in it, Joan. If there is, he is the boy to ferret it out. He had to have a bit of a brain to get his job."

Then Sir Henry re-appeared.

" My car is outside," he said. " I am just going to see Freeth. You can come, too, though you need not come in."

It did not take long to run round to the street off the Strand where Freeth had his office. On the way Sir Henry talked to them about the Brannock case and expressed the hope Sir Rollo would be cleared, although he professed to know nothing of the details. Joan had noticed that most people who talked of it said they knew very little about it. She realised that that was generally the kindest way of saying they thought things looked black for her lover. But she never allowed her faith to falter.

His interview with Freeth lasted about a quarter of an hour. He came out and told the chauffeur to take them to some works beyond Hendon.

" I think you are right," he said as they went along. " Freeth is an engineer, and probably a clever one, but he never worked that thing out himself. He under-

stands it, but he was uncertain about some little points and made a few mistakes. Now, I have met lots of men who have invented various things and I have always found that they know their scheme from A to Z. While they were working at it they have lived with it, and slept with it, until the thing became part of them. If you ask a question they simply overwhelm you with masses of detail, showing not only what they did but why they did it, and why they did not do a score of other things. Freeth was not like that. He hesitated and referred to notes and sometimes made slips. He has mastered the thing but I'll swear it was never born in his brain."

Joan felt herself going hot and cold in turns as she heard this. Her suspicion was correct. Rollo had been robbed. Perhaps the thing he had been robbed of was valueless. That did not matter. Who had robbed him and why? And where did it lead them?

They ran through Hendon and stopped at some engineering works not far from the new road to Wembley.

Sir Henry jumped nimbly out and said he would not be long. A man came forward and spoke to him and then he returned telling the chauffeur to take them home.

"It is as I thought," he remarked as he sat down again. "Those are Freeth's works and one of our men was there to-day examining some of the castings. I telephoned him to try and find out the exact date when they started working on the thing. He is on good terms with one of the foremen, and it is clear they only started three or four days before the plans and specifications were sent in. To me that is

conclusive. They got hold of some other man's scheme and patented it almost before they really knew what it was."

Very little was said on the homeward journey. They were each occupied with their thoughts. A very foul trick had been discovered, but how could they prove the dead man had had a hand in it? If they could prove that, how did it help them to discover his murderer?

When they reached town again they refused Sir Henry Whitelaw's offer to lunch. Joan wanted to be alone and to think.

"I am glad if I have helped you, Miss Wedderburn," he said at parting. "I hope I have, although I do not quite see how. If I can do more, please let me know. Tell Sir Rollo when—that is, if—I mean, tell Sir Rollo the idea is good, but he must improve on it."

"Oh, Bruce," cried the girl, when they were alone. "What does it all mean? It must mean something. How I wish we had more time!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE EVE OF THE TRIAL

IT was the eve of the great trial. Once again a council was being held to discuss the prospects of a successful defence. This time it was held in Querit's office and no ladies were present. Bruce Graham was there, the two brothers-in-law, George Tempest and Ernest Bennikin, and the detective, Grice Chester.

Before his visitors arrived Querit had been waiting with the detective and they had been glancing, not altogether with disapproval, at the papers that were once again stimulating public interest in the case.

"The Sloane Square Mystery: portraits of the principal parties in to-morrow's trial"; that was the heading of a page in The *Daily Picture*. Once again the photograph of Sir Rollo Brannock, the accused man, was given, and there was a characteristic portrait of Sir James Egan, the famous K.C., with his hand extended as though appealing to the judgment of his listeners. Sir Elphinstone Hawkins, who was to conduct the prosecution on behalf of the Crown, was also shown, while more interesting was a print of Gregory Querit, "the well-known solicitor who has prepared the case for the defence."

"If we get him off, Chester," said the solicitor to the man who had worked so often for him that he had become something of a confidential friend, "if we get him off it will be a big thing for all of us, but I am afraid it will be a miracle if we do. If anyone but Egan was leading for us I wouldn't give much for our chance, but with him there is always hope."

However, he did not express his misgivings so clearly when his visitors arrived. His tone was on the whole optimistic. He wanted them to realise the good work that had been done, but at the same time, in case of failure, he wished them to appreciate the magnitude of their difficulties.

"There is nothing very new to tell you," he said. "Sir James Egan, with whom I had a long conference this morning, thinks there are several points that will weigh with the jury. The discovery made by Mr. Graham that Sir Nicholas Brannock was himself the money-lender will remove any sympathy his death might occasion. It seems doubtful if we can prove much against Joe Levy, although I do not envy him his half-hour under cross-examination. Sir James will undoubtedly make much of the point that if Sir Nicholas was leading this double life, who can tell what else he was engaged in, or what secret enemies he may have had."

"Has anything further come of the robbery of Sir Rollo's plans for his couplings patent?" asked Bruce, who had thought it best to put that matter in the solicitor's hands.

"I am afraid not," replied Querit. "You see," he explained to the brothers-in-law, "Mr. Graham also discovered that two men named Jowlett and Freeth

had patented an automatic coupling that was identical in a most remarkable way with one Sir Rollo had been designing. From inquiries made there seems little doubt that these men must have got hold of Sir Rollo's plans and used them. It is suggested that Sir Nicholas Brannock may in some way have helped in this dishonest proceeding, as he is the only link we can discover between his nephew and this man Jowlett."

"Sounds a bit far-fetched," said Bennikin. "What should Sir Nicholas want with plans of railway couplings?"

"I have seen Sir Rollo on the matter," proceeded Querit. "He is now convinced his drawings were stolen and he has little doubt Sir Nicholas knew of their existence, but he cannot see how his uncle can have got hold of them. I have also discussed the matter fully with Sir James Egan, and he is very strongly of opinion that it would be most unwise to raise the point at all."

"Why?" asked Bruce.

"Because the question at issue is who killed Sir Nicholas. If it was our line of defence that Sir Rollo did it, and that he was justified in doing it, we might well introduce such a matter. Since we say Sir Rollo did not do it, we should only help the other side by supplying a motive that might account for his doing it. Even to mention the matter is to hint that our man had resentment against his uncle, and that is the last thing we want to do."

"I see that," said Bruce, "but there must be something behind it. Have you made inquiries about Jowlett and Freeth?"

"I saw Jowlett," said Grice Chester. "A very

remarkable man, apparently a pioneer of a new religion. When he heard his plans were identical with Sir Rollo's he said he sympathised with Sir Rollo, for he had just learned the idea was valueless; so they had both been wasting their time. He said he dabbled in engineering as a hobby, and having worked out this idea to a certain extent, took it to an expert friend to perfect. He also declared that his acquaintance with Sir Nicholas was slight and had to do with theology rather than engineering. Of course that may all be untrue, but it appears to be a fact that the patents are valueless, and cannot anyway have anything to do with the murder."

"Possibly not," said Bruce, still somewhat unconvinced. "Did you see Freeth?"

"Yes. He is a partner in an engineering firm and his story tallies with Gabriel Jowlett's."

"That certainly does not help us," observed Bennikin. "Have we anything to go on at all?"

"There is the matter of Miss Gayton," said Querit. "Of course from our point of view it would have been better if the truth as to her dinner for her husband had not come out till she was under cross-examination. Still, she concealed the facts before, and that we shall use to discredit her evidence. Unfortunately Mr. Chester's searches into her past do not reveal anything that will help us very materially.

"Our medical evidence, however, is satisfactory. Although Dr. Wilberforce is a witness against us he has been of great assistance. He has found cases recorded where the use of nitro-benzol has not had fatal results for five hours, and we have two other doctors who will support that and swear death might be

deferred for even longer. This will be a set-off against that unfortunate incident at half-past ten.

"Of course I must not conceal from you the difficulties we are up against. We cannot challenge their story in any important detail, and with the exception of the call at Shaftesbury Avenue we are unable to establish contact between Sir Nicholas and any fresh person during the evening. There is one point that may help us. Dr. Wilberforce will be able to say that the amount of nitro-benzol in his jar was originally two ounces. He took a quarter of an ounce for an experiment and he found almost an ounce and three quarters in his jar after the inquest, when he measured it. He therefore feels confident none had been removed. The weakness of that argument lies in the minute quantity necessary for a fatal dose. Sir James, however, may be relied on to give full force to the point."

"Wilberforce will do his best," remarked Bennikin, "but from what I saw of him at the inquest I should doubt if the jury will believe him."

"Wilberforce is Rollo's friend," said Bruce warmly, "but he is not a liar, and the jury ought to accept his word as readily as that of anyone else."

Bennikin shrugged his shoulders. "How long will the case last?" he asked.

"Two or three days, I should think," replied Querit. "There are not a large number of material witnesses, and on our side very few indeed. Sir Rollo will, of course, go into the box, and we have our doctors, but we may call no one else, although a few are subpœned. We cannot dispute the outline of their story. Our line lies in cross-examination and in showing their proofs are insufficient."

"Is it still impossible to show that Sir Nicholas may have committed suicide?" asked Tempest in his slow way.

"I am afraid it is," said Querit. "Needless to say, we have considered every detail that could possibly support such a suggestion, but there is really no ground for it at all."

"Could not the waiter at the Critz say he did not see Rollo tamper with the food?" asked Tempest again.

"That would be evidence, but evidence of no value, unless he could swear he was watching all the time," said Querit.

"I have seen the waiter," added Grice Chester. "He has four tables to look after, and there was another party at one of them. So he was going backwards and forwards all the time. I also found out who the people were at the other table, but it did not help us. They remembered two gentlemen being near them, but took no notice of what they were doing. We have put a lot of work into this case, as much as I ever remember putting into any case, but it has not helped us much."

Bennikin shrugged his shoulders again as though he did not think there was much help anyhow for their case.

"If it should happen that the jury returns a verdict of guilty," he asked, "is there likely to be a sentence of penal servitude?"

"I am afraid not," replied the solicitor gravely. "In a case of this kind an adverse verdict almost inevitably carries a capital sentence."

"What happens if the jury disagrees?" asked Tempest.

"There is then a fresh trial," replied Querit. "As you know, we cannot find the Scottish verdict of "not proven." It is a case of guilty or not guilty. Or else a new trial."

"And if the jury disagrees again?" asked Tempest.

"In theory we continue until they find a verdict, but in practice a case is dropped after three abortive trials; but I trust we need not think of things like that. Sir James Egan goes all out for not guilty."

"Of course he does," said Bennikin, in his unpleasant way, "and we all wish him success. We want the name cleared."

"I ought to tell you," put in Bruce, "that most of the work for us has been done by my cousin, Joan Wedderburn. It was she who discovered that Sir Nicholas was in reality Joe Levy, and it was she who found out about the theft of Rollo's designs."

"Very good of her," said Bennikin. "She broke off her engagement, didn't she? I should think she was precious thankful."

"So thankful," replied Bruce warmly, "that she has now renewed it, and they will be married directly he is free."

"Really? I wish them every happiness, but I won't order the fish-knives just yet!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE CASE FOR THE CROWN

MANY people are familiar with the interior of the Central Criminal Courts at the Old Bailey. There are those who earn their daily bread there, and pass through its swinging doors heedless of the tense dramas in real life that are being played before them unless they are personally concerned in the cases. There are the witnesses called from their ordinary duties to give testimony that will set this man free or send that other to his doom. There is the vast crowd of onlookers who have been once, twice, or more often to watch the procedure of the cases, and to satisfy their curiosity as to the personality of the parties involved. And there are those who have stood in the dock, while around them the fight has gone on that is to brand them as felons or to set them free once more as honourable citizens. To many of these the scenes in that court must be burnt into their memory for all time. They have endured the slow process of the law, its seeming repetition, its monotonous recapitulation of detail, its probing into apparent irrelevancies, its tireless endeavour to get at the truth. Their eyes have wandered round the court until every turn of the

woodwork, every rail, and every knob seems familiar. They have looked on their fellow men and women knowing that they may never see them again except through barred windows or while being hustled from one place of confinement to another.

On the day that was to see Sir Rollo Brannock tried a queue formed at an early hour to get seats in that part of the court reserved for the public. Privileged persons had applied for passes. Eminent actors, journalists, artists, dramatists and people of position in all callings sought to be present. Society ladies in silks and furs were there, and crowds of the general public hoped to get in to see "the handsome baronet who poisoned his uncle." He was there to stand his trial, but, from the way they spoke of him, most of those who pressed for admission had already come to a decision in the matter.

With the usual formalities the jury was chosen, and twelve men, no women being selected, passed into the box to be cut off from their fellows until the case was ended and their verdict recorded. A form of imprisonment for them designed to prevent any outside influences affecting their judgment.

The solicitors were in their seats, and the learned Counsel were in readiness. Front rows were reserved for the K.C.'s, and for the lesser known juniors who assisted them. Bruce Graham had secured good places for Joan Wedderburn and himself, and elsewhere in court were the Tempests and the Bennikins.

There was a cry of "silence!" Everyone rose to his feet and the Judge entered. A small man was this Judge, with a queer, unattractive face. His white wig and his scarlet robes gave him a certain dignity,

but it seemed to Joan he had a hard expression with small, almost cruel, eyes. Yet she was to see his coldness was impersonal. He favoured none more than the other.

Then the prisoner appeared. Every eye was turned on him. Rollo bore himself well. He was pale, but he held his head erect. He turned an unflinching eye on the crowd. Then he smiled, for he had seen Joan and her companion. And Joan felt a flutter of joy and hope. Rollo was neatly dressed in a dark grey suit and in his button-hole was a little sprig of white heather. Despite all the rules and regulations she had managed to smuggle something to him when she called at the prison. She had worn a little bunch of white heather, and one sprig she had detached and left on his table. Now he wore it in his button-hole—might it bring him luck !

Then Sir Elphinstone Hawkins rose to open the prosecution. He was a tall, thin man, a great contrast to his professional opponent, Sir James Egan. Egan was stout and florid, he had a persuading way with a jury, and he practised all the wiles of an actor's art. In the softest tones he could plead, in the loudest tones he could denounce ; he could be pathetic, indignant, humorous, all in turn. Sir Elphinstone Hawkins attempted nothing of the kind. He had a parchment complexion, lean jaws, and bushy black eyebrows ; he was cold, logical and pitiless. If Egan attempted pathos he would present facts. He would clip away the trimmings and present the ugly, naked facts with logic so irresistible that he carried conviction even to the unwilling.

He opened his case by telling the jurors they had a very remarkable story to hear, but they were to have no respects for persons. Those in high places, and bearing honoured names, were as amenable to the law as the humblest subjects. They would learn that Sir Nicholas Brannock, the man who had been murdered, had been concerned in things that were not creditable to an individual in his position. That again must not affect their judgment. Human life was sacred, and those who robbed their fellows of that precious and priceless gift must pay the penalty required by law.

In his quiet, emphatic way he outlined the whole story. Much of it was familiar to every one in the court, but the references to Lilla Gayton's husband and to the relations between Sir Nicholas and Joe Levy were new to most of them and caused a good deal of sensation. So also did one of his earlier statements, showing as it did the careful searches the prosecution had been making.

"The first chapter in this unhappy story," he said, "was written over two years ago. Then, Cornelius Brannock, the father of the man who now stands in that dock, died. In his will he left nothing whatever to his son Rollo, for he said the Brannock estates were entailed and must pass to him. Probably, when he made that will, Cornelius Brannock expected to outlive his older brother, Sir Nicholas, who was then enjoying the income from those estates. Fate ordained otherwise, and thus we see this young man was left penniless—penniless until his uncle died, and then vast wealth would be his. Instead of finding useful employment, even instead of asking his uncle for help,

or for an allowance, he had recourse to money-lenders, and, as you will hear, by another irony of fate, the money-lender he went to was one financed by his uncle. So in idleness he lived on borrowed money.

" Then we come to the fatal evening, the evening of Saturday the nineteenth of October," and he went on to tell in detail the familiar story of Rollo's arrival at the flat of the lady he had just become engaged to, and his shock at discovering that that lady was his uncle's mistress, and the subsequent quarrel. " I am not here to defend his uncle's illicit love," said Hawkins. " I am not here to condemn the nephew's recklessness in proposing to marry a woman he knew so little about, those are things on which much might be said, but they do not effect this case. As you will hear, the uncle remarked, and I think very naturally and properly remarked, that the position was one they must discuss later, quietly, more calmly, and not in the lady's presence.

" With his heart full of hate this young man rushed forth, and he rushed to the rooms of a friend where there were stored poisons of all kinds ; among them the poison from which Sir Nicholas died later that night."

So he unfolded the narrative in all its logical sequence, and he wound up with the reminder that they were there to do justice ; to hear carefully the evidence and to base their verdict upon it.

" We cannot say that anyone saw Rollo Brannock put the poison in his uncle's food. If that were necessary few murderers would ever be brought to justice. If we show you that Sir Nicholas died from poisoning, that the prisoner and no one else had very strong

motives for poisoning him, that the prisoner and no one else had access to the poison used on the night it was administered ; and that the prisoner and no one else had the opportunity at the fateful moment for administering it, then you are bound to assume that the prisoner did, in fact, murder his uncle."

It was a powerful speech and there were not many in that crowded court who had any doubt what the verdict would be. The first witness to be called was Sir Evan Leadenhall, the Home Office expert, who practically repeated the evidence he had given at the Coroner's inquest. When he had finished Sir James Egan got up for the first time.

" Now, Sir Evan," he said, in his friendliest way, " you tell us that nitro-benzol usually has fatal effects in two to two and a half hours. Is it not a fact that cases are recorded in which the action has been delayed for much longer than that ? "

" Not in my experience. I have known death to result in one hour, but the usual interval is two to two and a half hours."

" I am not talking of your experience only, Sir Evan, wide as that undoubtedly is. But of cases recorded in the experience of others."

" I know of none."

" Well, then, let me pass you these text books, and you will perhaps tell the court if you agree with the statements of these other chemists referring to intervals of over four hours."

Sir Evan glanced at the books. " They allude to such cases," he remarked, " but say they are very exceptional."

" But they exist," said Egan.

The next witness was Dr. Wilberforce, and as before he gave confirmatory evidence as to the cause of Sir Nicholas Brannock's death. He also admitted that he kept nitro-benzol in his poison cabinet, and if Sir Rollo had called at his rooms as stated he could have taken some had he so wished. Asked as to the interval that might elapse between the taking of the poison and its fatal result, he said two to three hours was perhaps the usual time, but he had been making special inquiries and had heard of cases where the interval had been up to five hours, or even more. He admitted that was very exceptional. Then Egan rose to cross-examine.

" You say, Dr. Wilberforce, you had nitro-benzol in your cabinet. Do you know how much you had ? "

" I can tell very closely. I originally had two ounces, as I prepared it myself. I later took out a quarter of an ounce for an experiment, so that left an ounce and three-quarters."

" You had one ounce and three-quarters on the Saturday evening when Sir Rollo called. Did you measure it again later ? "

" I did."

" And what was the quantity then ? "

" One ounce and three-quarters."

This caused some sensation in Court. If there was an ounce and three-quarters when Sir Rollo called and there was the same amount afterwards, the case broke down ! But Sir Elphinstone was on his feet.

" Is it a fact, Dr. Wilberforce, that at the Coroner's inquest you refused to answer questions because Sir Rollo was your friend ? "

"I protested at first. I considered I was there as an expert witness only."

"Is it a fact that at the inquest you were specifically asked if you had specially measured the amount of nitro-benzol in your bottle, and you stated you had not?"

Before the doctor could reply, Sir James was on his feet.

"I object to the question, my lord. This is his own witness and he cannot cross-examine him."

There was a little altercation between the counsel, but the Judge eventually decided that the questions must proceed, and Dr. Wilberforce could be treated as a hostile witness.

"I had not measured the contents of my bottle then," the doctor replied when the question was repeated, "but I made it my business to do so directly I returned. There was then almost exactly an ounce and three-quarters."

"You say 'almost exactly'—what do you mean by that?"

"There was one ounce and three drachms precisely. Eight drachms go to the ounce."

"And sixty minims go to the drachm—so that there were sixty minims short—more than a fatal dose?"

"Yes," said the doctor uneasily.

"Another thing, you say you prepared two ounces, and you took at some later date a quarter of an ounce. Remember you are on your oath. Can you swear your bottle was absolutely empty when you put those two ounces in?"

"Yes, I always empty and clean a bottle before refilling it."

"Can you swear the two ounces you prepared and the quarter ounce you took were absolutely measured to a minim, or were they approximate?"

"They were—they were approximate."

"So that the fact that sixty minims were missing and the fact that the other measurements were approximate shows that enough poison might have been taken to kill half a dozen people! Thank you."

"One minute, please." Sir James was on his feet again. "We are told that fifteen drops of this nitrobenzol is a fatal dose. Now you as a chemist would measure a poison in that way, but I suggest that anyone else wanting poison, and in a hurry, would tip some into another bottle and would more likely take half an ounce, or half a bottleful, than a few minims?"

"Stop, stop," said the Judge. "I am surprised at you, Sir James. That is most improper. You must not put words into the witness's mouth, asking him to say what some other person might do."

Sir James looked pained, but he had expected his question to be disallowed. The great thing was to put it and let the idea sink into the minds of the jurors. Most of the people in court, however, felt that Dr. Wilberforce had shown his willingness to help his friend, but had once again failed to do so.

After this there was an interval for lunch. The Judge walked out, everyone rising as before, the prisoner was led below, and the counsel and solicitors withdrew to get refreshment. Some of the crowd went too, but a large number sat where they were. They knew that the Judge generally took only half an

hour for his meal, and they did not want to run the risk of losing their seats.

Bruce persuaded Joan to go out for a few minutes. She said she did not want any lunch, but he had got a friend to have something ready for them in a restaurant near at hand and he made her eat a little and swallow a glass of wine.

They hardly spoke during the meal. At one moment Joan said :

" Dr. Wilberforce meant well—do you think it will help ? "

" It may," said Bruce. " Some people never make good witnesses. They hesitate too much."

A little later she remarked :

" How calm Rollo looked. He watched every witness, and I could read his thoughts almost as though he had said them aloud. " What you say is all true, but I did not do it, I never dreamed of doing it.' That is what he was thinking. No angry, bitter thoughts. Only that." Then they hurried back to their places.

When the court reassembled Lilla Gayton was called. She was again dressed in black and showed considerable agitation as she took the oath. She told her story much as before, except that on this occasion, under the skilful questioning of Sir Elphinstone, she gave the history of her marriage and the habit that had arisen for her invalid husband to spend Saturday evenings with her. She had meant on that last Saturday to try to break with her old connections, and to see if it was possible to marry Rollo. She described the scene between the uncle and the nephew, and she repeated that

Sir Nicholas had said they must meet later to come to an understanding.

Sir James Egan tackled her first on that point. She admitted Rollo made no reply to his uncle's suggestion, but she would not qualify her statement that it had been made. She, in fact, had determined to tell the truth, and that is the only way that baffles the cross-examiner. Sir James had at first treated her gently, then he became more severe.

"Why did you say nothing at the inquest about your husband?"

"I was not asked. I did not think it mattered."

"You let the court think the dinner was prepared for Sir Nicholas. You deceived the court?"

"I was not asked."

"When you and your husband separated what was your mode of life?"

The girl did not answer.

"You must tell me. You lived with another man?"

"Yes." The reply was almost inaudible.

"Who was he?"

"Must I say?" The girl turned her half-frightened eyes to the Judge.

"Is it material, Sir Henry?" asked his lordship.

"I want to show, my lord, that this is a common woman, leading a loose life, and her word is not to be relied on."

The girl flushed scarlet and then turned pale again.

"I lived with two men before I met Sir Nicholas," she said. "He knew it. I have been straight with them all."

"And were you straight with Sir Rollo, when you, a woman still with a husband, and still meeting that

husband, and still living under another man's protection, accepted his offer of honourable marriage ? "

The girl made no reply.

" Answer me. Were you straight with Sir Rollo? "

" I should have told him," she said, in a very low tone.

" When would you have told him ? "

" I meant to tell him that night." She had kept her eyes averted from the prisoner who was listening intently to all that was being said. She might have lived badly, undoubtedly she had sinned, but there were not a few in court who felt sorry for her.

Sir James pressed her with other questions as to her mode of life. He reduced her to tears, but he did not elicit any further information. When the questions were ended she left the box and sat by her former husband in the body of the court.

So far the story unfolded by the prosecution had not been seriously shaken. Sir James himself felt he had not many points to his credit. A newcomer to the box was Joe Levy.

He repeated the story already known to a few of them, how his business belonged in fact to Sir Nicholas, he being only his paid nominee. He gave evidence as to Sir Rollo's borrowings and said the uncle was well aware of them. In fact, the uncle had authorised him to let him have more if he wanted it. Sir Nicholas had been with him for half an hour on the Saturday evening in accordance with a previous appointment. No reference to Sir Rollo had been made during their conversation, which dealt with other matters.

" When did you inform the authorities that Sir

Nicholas had called on you ? " asked Egan in cross-examination.

" A veek ago."

" Why did you keep silent so long ? "

" I vanted to keep out of de matter."

" Why then did you tell a week ago ? "

" A friend of Sir Rollo's called on me and persuaded me to tell."

" Persuaded or compelled ? "

The little man smiled and shrugged his shoulders. " Both," he said.

" Sir Nicholas was with you for half an hour. Did he have anything to eat ? "

" Sir Nicholas vas an abstemious man. He had dinner, as ve know, at eight o'clock, and supper at ten-thirty."

" Don't make speeches," snapped the K.C. " Did Sir Nicholas have anything to eat while he was with you ? "

" No."

" Anything to drink ? "

" No."

" You say your business really belonged to Sir Nicholas. How much of his money did you handle ? "

" Between seventy and eighty tousand pounds."

" And what would have happened to that money if your plan to keep silent had succeeded ? If you had not been persuaded, as you call it, to tell your story to the police ? "

" It vould all have gone back to Sir Nicholas's estate."

" You expect the court to believe that ? "

Again the little man shrugged and threw out his hands.

"Sir Nicholas vas no fool," he said. "Our accounts vas alvays audited and the accountants knew all about it."

That again, although it furnished a sensation to those who were listening for sensations, did not assist the defence. A number of witnesses followed. The waiter who served the supper at the Critz and took Sir Nicholas to the telephone box. The butler, Marsh, who received the telephone message from his master at ten-thirty. The driver who took Sir Nicholas to his nephew's flat and then took them both to the restaurant. All made their statements as at the Coroner's Court, and there was little for Sir James Egan to seize on or to contest.

To Bruce Graham and the girl by his side, who knew the whole story so well, it seemed that no new thing had happened that could help their friend. Witness after witness repeated his part, and all the details fitted together, just as they had done before, into a damning whole. The vaunted cross-examination of the great K.C. had accomplished very little. The two spots in the case that had looked a little weak did not appear to have been made weaker. Did Sir Nicholas say he would see Rollo again? Lilla Gayton, not a hostile witness, said he did. Egan might urge that she was a woman whose evidence was not to be relied on. Would he persuade the jury of that? The fact remained that Sir Nicholas had gone to seek his nephew, which strengthened the suggestion he had said he would do so.

Then Wilberforce and his evidence as to the quantity

of liquid in his bottle. If his statements had been more certain, and if he had not had to admit his previous evidence denying he had made measurements, it might have helped. As it stood would it convince anybody ?

Their hearts sank. It seemed impossible to see where the truth was to come from. When Sir Elphinstone Hawkins had finished with his last witness he said, " That is my case," and hardly a soul in the crowd doubted that he had made out his case, and the morrow would give him his verdict.

It was late in the afternoon and the Judge, rising, said, " Ten o'clock to-morrow." Everyone stood as he went out. The prisoner was led away. He still had a smile for his friends across the court, although he had sat motionless through the long hearing with his head resting on his hand. Joan waved to him, and tried to put hope and encouragement into her glance, but her heart was sad and heavy.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FIRST WITNESS

IT is a common experience to those who have served on a jury that, when the first counsel makes his opening statement it sounds absolutely convincing. In a civil case the juryman wonders how the other party dared to come into court. In a criminal case the "other party" probably had no wish to be there, but their guilt appears beyond question.

This feeling is strengthened when the first, usually the principal, witness is called and confirms the counsel's story. Then follows the cross-examination of this witness, and for the first time the juror begins to see glimpses of a new light. The case is not so fool-proof as it looked. Points that seemed conclusive develop signs of weakness, and it even appears that certain matters will bear an entirely different interpretation to that at first put on them. Doubts arise. The juror thinks he has been a little hasty. The case proceeds, and more and more of the defendant's cause is revealed. Then the defending counsel speaks, and it is obvious there are two distinct cases and the "twelve men and true" have to decide which of them they believe.

In the Brannock case it must be admitted no such illumination came to the jurors while the Crown witnesses were under cross-examination. There may have been some moments of doubt, but no clear alternative had ever presented itself. When the court reopened the next day it was not anticipated that the further hearing would take very long. There appeared to be one case, and one case only.

Sir James Egan, the eminent leader for the defence, dwelt in one of the smaller houses in Berkeley Square. He drove each day to his chambers, or to the court where he was appearing, in his beautifully appointed Rolls-Royce car. He had been successful in life, but his expenses were high and his mode of living extravagant. Despite the huge fees he could command he still had to work hard, and he still had to strive for success in order to maintain his supreme position as a criminal advocate.

This morning he was not happy. The papers were again full of the Sloane Square Mystery, as it still was called, and reported the previous day's hearing at great length. They did not comment on it, as comment would be out of place while the trial was proceeding. Yet his practised eye could see that his chances of success were regarded as almost hopeless. It is true there were references to his "severe cross-examination" and to his "sharp questions for the defence," but the general effect of the reports was to set out the deadly completeness of the case for the prosecution.

He leant back in his well-cushioned seat and there

was a frown on his usually cheerful face. Dr. Wilberforce had let him down. His evidence had been counted on, but the poor fool was so painfully anxious to be scrupulously truthful that it had become valueless What is the use of talking of "approximately" two ounces, and "about," a quarter of an ounce, when the case may turn on drops? He felt, too, he had not done what he had hoped to do with Lilla Gayton. Her morality, or want of it, would not help him much. As for Joe Levy, the wretched Jew had actually tried to score off him! If there was dinner at eight and supper at ten-thirty, Sir Nicholas would not want a meal at half-past nine. Impertinent little devil! Who said he would?

No, on the whole he had not had a good day; but his case had still to be heard. Could he persuade the jury to disregard the evidence they had listened to? He had no witnesses but his doctors, and their evidence was not of much account. It all rested on him—and, of course, on Sir Rollo, who was to go into the box. He had made full inquiries into Rollo's past life. His record was a clean one—public school and university success, distinguished service in the war, including an M.C. and a mention in despatches. That, unfortunately, did not carry the weight it used to do, and with Hawkins to follow with his pitiless logic it might not go far. Still, it was fair to argue that a man who had had an honourable career for so long, would not suddenly sink to the lowest level of crime.

Arrived at the court, he found the solicitor, Querit, waiting for him in the room set apart for the lawyers concerned in the case.

"I have been approached by Septimus Ruskin," said Querit. "He says that Lady Brannock wishes to go into the box."

"What—the widow? What will she say?"

"She will say that she does not believe that Sir Rollo is guilty."

"That will not help us much. No doubt we could get dozens of people to say that. The Judge would not allow it."

Then he considered for a moment. Of course it was not evidence, but it would be a striking point in his speech. "Think of it," he could say, "think of it. The bereaved widow of the dead man, still crushed by her loss, voluntarily leaves the seclusion of her darkened home and comes here to say you must not condemn an innocent person. She has known him from his boyhood, and stricken as she is by this cruel blow, she will not see so awful an injustice done." Yes, it would be very effective.

"We will have her," he said to the solicitor.

"Right. I will let Ruskin know. He wants her called at once, as she is not well."

The court had filled directly the doors were opened. Bruce and Joan were again able to secure good seats, and before long the jurymen filed in and took their places. They looked none the worse for their night as compulsory guests of the State. The Judge entered, bowed to the court, and took his seat. Then the prisoner was brought in. He was dressed as on the previous day, and Joan noted he still had his sprig of white heather. He gave her a smile, but it was a wan, tired smile. He looked more pale and weary than he had done before. It was easy to guess he had

passed a sleepless night, going through the evidence again and again, wondering, almost hopelessly, how he was to break through the terrible net that was entangling him.

A few moments later Sir James Egan was up. He said at once that he did not propose to address the court then but would reserve his remarks until after his witnesses had been heard. He would first call Lady Brannock.

There was some stir when he said this, for no one had expected the dead man's widow to appear, and few had noticed the little group near the front, where the tall lady in deep mourning sat with her solicitor, Septimus Ruskin, her medical attendant, Dr. Sarbleton, and Marsh, the faithful butler.

She rose at once. Supported by her doctor she made her way slowly to the witness-box, he handing her carefully in. She, however, appeared perfectly composed and took the oath in a clear, low voice.

"You are Lady Brannock," said Egan, in his most sympathetic tone, "the widow of the late Sir Nicholas Brannock?"

"I am."

"Sir Rollo Brannock, who is accused of poisoning your late husband, is your nephew?"

"He is."

"You have known Sir Rollo Brannock all his life?"

"All his life."

"And you are here to tell us you do not believe him to be guilty of the crime of which he is accused?"

"*I know he is not.*"

The words came slowly, but with an unmistakable emphasis that startled the court, straining as it was to hear every syllable.

"You *know* he is not?" Egan echoed the words which surprised him, as they had surprised everyone else. Counsel is usually aware of what his own witnesses are to say. This was unexpected.

"I know he is not," Lady Brannock repeated. Her voice was trembling, she was clutching the rail in front of her with both her hands.

The Judge leant forward and looked at her over the top of his spectacles.

"You may believe it," he said, not unkindly, "but you cannot know it, unless you can tell us who did poison your husband."

"I know it—because my husband died at God's hand."

The words came in a kind of a gasp, but they were clearly heard all over the hushed court. The Judge looked at her again, and then asked in his slow, cold tone——

"What did you say?"

"My husband died at God's hand."

She tried to repeat the words firmly, her grip on the rail tightened and her eyes seemed to be staring wildly from her ashen face. The Judge glanced reproachfully at the Counsel and at the lady's doctor. She was ill. The strain was too much for her. They ought not to have brought her there. But the witness seemed to know what he was thinking.

"He died at God's hand," she said again, chokingly, "and I—I was His instrument!"

A murmur of amazement, incredulity, pity, passed

through the court as everyone watched the trembling woman.

"Lady Brannock," said the Judge, very gravely, "do you understand what you are saying?"

"I know. I understand. I accept—the responsibility." She swayed as the words were forced out. She made another effort to control herself. "I prayed—I prayed—" but she could not finish. She thrust her hand into the bosom of her dress and drew out a small roll of paper. "It is written here!" she cried wildly, and then she collapsed on to the floor of the box.

Dr. Sarbleton rushed to her aid, and others helped him to remove her from the court. The roll of paper had fallen to the floor and Septimus Ruskin had seized it.

For some moments there was commotion in the court, but not a word was spoken until the lady had been carried out. No one seemed to know what should happen next. Then Septimus Ruskin, speaking with considerable emotion, addressed the Judge.

"I wrote this document yesterday, my lord, at Lady Brannock's dictation. She signed it, with myself and Dr. Sarbleton as witnesses. Against our urgent entreaties she insisted on coming here, but she made me promise to read it if her strength failed."

He unrolled the paper, but Sir Elphinstone Hawkins was on his feet.

"My lord, this is most irregular. I have had no notice of any such document. It is quite out of order. It cannot be read."

"Let me see it," said the Judge, in his cold, even tones. It was passed to him and his eyes ran quickly down the closely written pages.

"I will retire for half an hour," he said. "Please let me know when I return if Lady Brannock can resume her evidence."

Everyone rose, and with the dignity of his high calling the Judge left the court.

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT IS MY CASE

WHEN the Judge had gone a low murmur of conversation broke out all over the court. What did it mean? Lady Brannock knew the prisoner was not guilty. Sir Nicholas had died at God's hand, she was His instrument, and she accepted responsibility. Did she mean that she herself was guilty of the crime? If so, how had her husband died at God's hand? Had her sad troubles affected her brain? What could be contained in that document the Judge had taken away with him?

Joan had seized Bruce Graham's arm, but she hardly spoke. Her heart was beating furiously, she felt almost choking herself. Rollo was innocent, but what did Lady Brannock mean? It was impossible she had committed the awful deed—how and when could she have done it? Was she trying to take the blame on herself in a noble effort to save her nephew? Yet surely they were near the truth at last. Why did they stop?

There was a slight disturbance at the back of the court. Dorothy Tempest had got up and was trying to push her way out to see if she could do anything for her Aunt.

"Ought I to go to her?" Joan whispered, but Bruce shook his head and motioned her to remain. He knew all that could be done would be done.

The minutes went by. A messenger came and handed a slip of paper to Hawkins. He showed it to Egan and the two great K.C.'s rose together and went out. Why had they gone? Did the Judge wish to see them?

In their new excitement many of those present had almost forgotten the prisoner. He had remained standing when the Judge went out. He stood erect and rigid. His aunt's self-accusation seemed in a way to have paralysed him. Then the warders motioned him to go below, and he disappeared, perhaps for the first time thankful for a moment's solitude.

Time passed. Murmurs ran round the court. What was happening? Why such a long delay? How was Lady Brannock? Then an usher whispered something to the jury, and they got up from their seats and filed out to their private room. Then it was told that the case was adjourned until after lunch.

Few left the court—though the waiting was almost unbearable to those whose interest was so intense. Rumours of all kinds were whispered from seat to seat. Bruce Graham, from his knowledge of the law, had some idea of what might be happening. Beckoning Joan to follow, he passed out to make enquiries.

"Lady Brannock is very, very ill," he said as he rejoined her in the corridor. "That document she signed, if it is anything in the nature of a confession, is inadmissible in law while she is alive. She must tell her story in the witness-box where she can be cross-examined. I do not see how they can proceed with

the case disregarding what she said and what she wrote, yet it is irregular to read it. There may be a long adjournment."

"Oh, Bruce, how terrible for Rollo—but it is not so bad now—everyone must see he is innocent."

"I hope so, my dear, but the position is curious. I wish my law had not got so rusty. Lady Brannock's statement is apparently contrary to her own interests, so the Judge may allow it to be read."

"Surely, surely he must," said the girl. "She knows Rollo is innocent and it will clear up everything."

Mercifully, perhaps, the fears as to a long adjournment were not realised. Later in the afternoon it was known that Lady Brannock, who never recovered consciousness after her collapse in the witness-box, had died. Rumours to that effect flew round the crowded court before the actual fact was confirmed.

The patient jurors returned to their box, the Counsel resumed their seats, the Judge re-entered, and the prisoner was brought back. His lordship informed the jury what had happened, and then called for Septimus Ruskin. The all important document was handed back to him.

"You can now read this," said the Judge very gravely.

The white-haired solicitor took his place in the witness box. His hand trembled as he held the fateful paper, and it was with difficulty that he kept his voice steady as he read its contents.

"I, Catherine Brannock, widow of the late Sir Nicholas Brannock, knowing that I have not long to live, do hereby declare that my husband died

by the hand of God, and that his death was in just punishment for his sins, and to prevent his sinning yet more deeply. I wish publicly to proclaim the manner of his death so that no shadow of blame may rest on his nephew, Rollo Brannock, who not only had no part whatever in it, but was entirely ignorant of the causes that led to it."

Septimus Ruskin paused for a moment and cleared his throat.

There was absolute silence, and soon he resumed :

" My husband was unfaithful to me, not once but many times. That, perhaps, may be thought a small matter. The agony that it occasioned me died down long ago. My faith forbids divorce.

" For years I had known that he was interested in the money-lending business conducted by Joe Levy. No one else knew it, but he made no secret of it to me. He claimed that he was doing a useful and legitimate work. Banks, he would say, lent other people's money to their customers on first-class security, and charged a low rate of interest for doing it. He lent his own money on second-class security, or on no security at all, and charged a high rate of interest.

" The real horror of it did not dawn on me till after the death of Lord John Randall. Then I discovered that, although everything was done in Joe Levy's name, my husband was the actual lender, and was responsible for all that happened. He gave money in charity, but what he gave was a trifle to what he secretly extorted from those he called his friends.

" The case of Lord John Randall, although the most tragic, was only one of many. In three years Lord

John had dissipated a large fortune and was borrowing from Joe Levy. He was allowed to borrow up to a certain limit and then, when all his resources were pledged, further credit was refused and pressure applied to extort payment. He was forced into bankruptcy and in his despair he destroyed himself. At the inquest Joe Levy was censured for his harsh conduct and his heartless usury. What the world never knew was that Nicholas Brannock, the reputed philanthropist, at whose house young Randall was a frequent visitor, was in reality the usurer who had driven him to his doom.

"That was not all. It was after our son's death, in the early years of the war, that my husband became more cynical and embittered. Our boy was the one interest that held us together. But for him I should have left Sir Nicholas long before. For his sake I remained, that he might never know the chasm that divided his parents. When he was taken, I was an old woman and things did not seem to matter. Our grief did not draw us nearer, for the one connecting link was snapped. My husband changed in many ways, but the strangest, saddest way was that he grew bitterly jealous of his nephew Rollo."

At this point Septimus Ruskin paused in his reading and wiped his glasses. The people in the court looked at the prisoner in the dock who was being vindicated in this remarkable manner. Could it be the fact that the uncle had wronged the nephew? It was a strange thing that, although nearly everyone up to a few minutes before was sure that the nephew had poisoned the uncle, now no one for a moment doubted the truth of what they were hearing. Everyone, from

the Judge and the King's Counsellors to the ushers and the onlookers, waited in absolute silence for the story to be completed.

"Nicholas Brannock had never liked his brother Cornelius. He had always been jealous of him, and it maddened him to think that when our boy died, Cornelius and his son became heirs to the Brannock estates. His feeling towards Rollo was little short of hatred.

"Cornelius left Rollo unprovided for, and I asked my husband to make him an allowance. He curtly refused. 'Not a penny till I am gone,' he said. 'Let him earn his living. If he cannot do that a year or two of starvation will not harm him.' He discovered through Joe Levy that Rollo was working at an invention in connection with railway couplings that if successful would win him a fortune, and he did then one of the most dastardly things that one man could do to another. In order to bring about his nephew's ruin, he went to the man who was working with him at his patent and bribed him with a huge sum to betray his partner and sell duplicates of the drawings and specifications that were completed. This man—Peterson was his name—accepted five thousand pounds as the price of his treachery, and when he went with Rollo to get protection for their designs, he professed to be broken-hearted at finding someone had forestalled them by a few days; and he left the country."

There was a sudden noise in court. The prisoner's clenched fist had fallen on the wooden top of the dock as he heard this tale of his friend's perfidy, and he sprang to his feet as though he would have cried out in his horror and amazement. Then, recollecting

where he was, and the position he was in, he sank back again.

"My husband, having secured the details of the invention, consulted a man he knew called Gabriel Jowlett. This man discovered an engineer named Freeth who understood the plans and drawings, and the rights were secured in their names. A secret agreement was made with Sir Nicholas, and Rollo Brannock found all his work was wasted, and he was heavily in debt. Part of this I discovered by accident.

"It was more than I could bear. I knew my husband was relentless and would take other steps to injure and ruin the nephew he hated. I thought of the fate of Lord John Randall, and of others whose lives had been spoilt, and I wondered that God allowed a man to live and to continue to work such evil. I could not endure my existence while these things were going on. I prayed to God to judge between me and my husband.

"My own father had dabbled in chemistry and once he had shown me a tiny phial. 'This,' he said 'contains a deadly poison. If anyone took it he would die hours afterwards, almost suddenly, as though God's hand had struck him down.' After my father's death I found that phial and kept it. I had forgotten it until these things brought it to my mind. I searched and found I still had it. It seemed the same as before, the colour slightly tinged with yellow.

"I determined that either I or my husband should take it. God should decide which. My husband generally had a drink, some preparation of bitters made by our butler, at about seven o'clock each evening. A glass was always there for me too, but I

seldom touched it. I determined to put that poison in one of the glasses, and after Nicholas had taken one I would drink the contents of the other."

The voice of Septimus Ruskin, the solicitor who had acted for the family for so many years, broke as it reached this point, and it was some moments before he could proceed.

"On the evening of Saturday, October the nineteenth, Marsh, the butler, prepared the drinks as usual. I watched for him. He left them for a moment, and I slipped out and poured part of the contents of my bottle into one of the glasses. He came and offered them to me and I refused. He then bore them both to his master, who took one of them. I called Marsh to me and I drank the contents of the other.

"I did not know which I had taken. It tasted strange and bitter. I thought I had swallowed the poisoned one. My husband went out, and I threw myself on my bed. I thought I was dying. I lay there and waited for the end. If I had sinned, God had punished me. I was ready to die, for life had nothing but pain for me. I do not know how the time passed. I was unconscious of it. I felt peaceful and I wondered if that was death. Perhaps I slept. Hours must have gone by. Then I heard noises downstairs. I went down and Marsh told me that Sir Nicholas was dead. It was God's will. I must have fainted, for I knew nothing more till I found myself in bed again and Dr. Sarbleton was with me.

"If I had done wrong, perhaps it was my punishment that the one I had sought to save was brought to such dire peril by my act. Owing to a curious

combination of circumstances it looked as though Rollo had poisoned his uncle. Doctors argued how long the poison might take to act. Of that I knew nothing. Possibly the preparation as made by my father differs from the preparations made to-day. Possibly the years it had been kept affected its potency. I cannot tell. I was in deep anguish when I realised Rollo's danger, but I felt the matter must right itself. It was unthinkable that he, who was so absolutely innocent, should be suspected of harming the man who had plotted against him."

" Then, when I found how extreme his peril was, I determined to tell the entire story, and to tell it so that the whole world that had heard the accusation might hear the real truth. God grant that I may have strength to tell it, and if I have sinned may He in His boundless grace forgive me."

The old solicitor paused. He glanced at the Judge, and then he added :

" Signed, Catherine Brannock. Witnesses, James Sarbleton, Doctor of Medicine, and Septimus Ruskin, Solicitor and Commissioner of Oaths."

There was silence again in the court. Seldom if ever before has there been such a scene in that famous building, or even in the more famous one that stood there before it. But Sir James Egan was on his feet. He extended his arms to the jury.

" That," he said, " that is my case."

It was the briefest speech for the defence he had ever made, and perhaps the most effective. There was a buzz in the court, followed by the cry of " Silence ! " The Judge spoke.

" I want to see Dr. Sarbleton."

Messengers ran to fetch him but returned to say he had left the court. He had himself been taken ill after the shock of his patient's death, and had not realised that his further attendance would be required. The hour was getting late and the Judge decided he could not finish that day, although he told the jury he was sorry to detain them further.

"The Court is adjourned till ten o'clock to-morrow," he said in his severe, unemotional voice. "Sir Rollo Brannock is released on his own undertaking to return then."

At this there were cheers that could not be suppressed. The pent-up emotions of that remarkable hour had to find an outlet, and applause rang through the building as the prisoner stepped from the dock a free man, for all felt that such in effect he was.

Many pressed forward to seize him by the hand, but there was only one he was looking for. And a moment later, before them all, he was clasping in his arms his affianced bride.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DAY AFTER

THE newspapers the next morning were full of the dramatic happenings at the great trial. The innocence of the accused was regarded as established beyond question, although the tortuous requirements of the law might not have been fully complied with. The death of Lady Brannock in such remarkable circumstances could not entirely escape comment, although the case was still nominally unsettled. It was known that she suffered from a weak heart, and the terrible task she had set herself to accomplish, after the weeks of anguish she had suffered while her nephew was in prison, would have overcome a stronger constitution than hers.

Perhaps it was a fitting end to the problem she had set herself to solve. Both she and her husband would appear before that Judgment Seat to which she had appealed, where the secrets of all hearts and the motives of all actions are known.

Another announcement in the morning papers was of a happier character. It told of the engagement, or more correctly the re-engagement, of Sir Rollo Brannock and Miss Joan Wedderburn. The *Daily Picture* described it as a happy sequel to the Sloane Square

Mystery. It claimed good authority for stating that Miss Wedderburn was so unflinchingly assured of her lover's innocence that she had visited him in his prison and insisted on the renewal of their betrothal. One may wonder how these things get into the papers. Are the bright young reporters informed of them, or have they an uncanny insight into the poetic fitness of things that enables them to assume that what should be has actually happened? In any case no denial or correction was necessary this time.

The Court was almost as crowded the next morning as it had been at the previous hearings of the case. The public knew that the mystery was solved and the true facts revealed, but there were many who wished to have another peep at the young Baronet who had passed through such a cruel ordeal, and perhaps at the plucky girl to whom he was now affianced. Many notable trials have thrilled the heart of the great British public, but few have moved it so profoundly as this had done. The remarkable revelations as to the secret pursuits of the murdered man, the apparent certainty of the guilt of the accused and his final and complete vindication, had created sensations that would not readily be forgotten. The "happy ending" of the promised wedding bells was indeed a fitting climax.

The prisoner was early in Court again. Awaiting the moment when he must return for the last time to the felon's dock, he sat by the side of his promised bride.

"Rollo," she whispered to him, "I want you to do something for me."

" What is it ? " he asked, with a smile that was as good as a promise.

" I had a long talk with Lilla Gayton yesterday, and with her husband. I believe they could be happy again together. Would you lend them enough money to make a start in an honest business, if they re-married and promised to do their best ? "

He pressed her hand which was lying close to his own.

"The Brannocks have done with lending money," he whispered back. " If they will really make a new start I will give them what they need. We owe Lilla more than a little."

Then he resumed his place in the dock, the Judge took his seat, and the proceedings commenced. Dr. Sarbleton entered the witness-box. After he had taken the oath he was handed the statement that Septimus Ruskin had read the day before. The Judge took the matter in hand, without troubling the Counsel.

" You have been Lady Brannock's medical attendant for several years ? " he asked.

" I have," said the doctor, speaking rather shakily.

" You were a witness to her signature to that document you now hold and which was read to the court yesterday ? "

" I was."

" Did Lady Brannock know and understand what is in that document ? "

" She did. It was read over to her in my presence before she signed it."

" Was she at the time in full and complete possession of her faculties ? "

"She was."

"Is there anything you would add to what is contained in that document?"

"One thing," replied the doctor in a low, half-choking voice. "When Lady Brannock completed her statement she handed me the phial that she said had contained the poison she used. This is it." He held up a small old-fashioned bottle still containing a minute quantity of a pale yellowish liquid.

"Has that been tested?" asked the Judge.

"Yes, my lord, Sir Evan Leadenhall and myself tested it this morning. It is nitro-benzol."

"That is all," said the Judge. Dr. Sarbleton left the box and the Judge turned to the jury. The case was ended at last. Everyone waited eagerly for his final words. He said he was sure that all would be profoundly thankful that by the statement or confession made by Lady Brannock at the eleventh hour, the very grave risk of a most serious miscarriage of justice had been averted. There could be no doubt that what proved to be her dying words were true. She had said she accepted responsibility for the crime, and now she had passed beyond the realm of man's jurisdiction. Sir Rollo Brannock had been publicly accused of administering poison to his uncle. He was proved to be entirely innocent and he, as the Judge of that Court, bade them return a verdict of "Not Guilty."

There was a little whispering in the jury-box. The twelve men put their heads together and the foreman got up and said they desired not only to return a verdict of "Not Guilty," but to express to Sir Rollo

Brannock their deep and respectful sympathy in the pain and anxiety he had suffered.

So in cheers ended the trial. Rollo, a free man now in every way, was surrounded by his friends. Sir James Egan shook him heartily by the hand, and even Sir Elphinstone Hawkins expressed his congratulations. Gregory Querit, too, had his share in the glory. Then Rollo's family had their turn. He kissed his two sisters, and while George Tempest was thinking of an appropriate remark, Ernest Bennikin wrung his hand and said :

" Of course *we* never doubted you, old man ; but we are delighted that the whole world is now convinced."

Then, with Joan at his side, there was a move to the door. In the street a vast crowd had assembled and was surrounding the motor-car that waited to take him and his bride-to-be to home and freedom.

" Where is Bruce ? " whispered Joan. " I never can tell you all we owe to him."

" I know," said Rollo. " He must come with us."

They turned back and found their best friend walking quietly behind those whose faith was so fresh and fervent. Rollo seized his hands.

" You must come with us," he cried.

" Not to-day," was the reply. " You will see plenty of me later on."

So, with difficulty, the happy pair made their way through the cheering throng. Bruce watched them with a quiet, contented smile. Then he glanced round the crowd. Most of the onlookers were

shouting and waving their hats and handkerchiefs, but one girl was looking almost wistfully at the car as it slowly moved away. He recognised her at once from Joan's description. It was Myrtle Turner. And there quite close to her was Ned Lamport. He himself did not want a wife with a pleasing squint, but who could tell what Ned's tastes might be? Anyway, he would take them both to lunch!

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